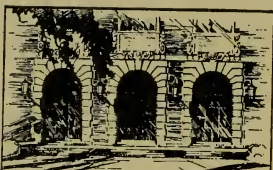




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# LUCIUS DAVOREN

OR

## PUBLICANS AND SINNERS

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

'LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET'

ETC. ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.



LONDON

JOHN MAXWELL AND CO.

4 SHOE LANE, FLEET STREET

1873

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LONDON :  
ROBSON AND SONS, PRINTERS, PANCRAS ROAD, N.W

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# LUCIUS DAVOREN

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Book the First.

## CHAPTER XIV.

GEOFFREY LEARNS THE WORST.

THEY had dined, and the letter was written. A week-old moon shone in the placid heaven ; the tender night-stillness had descended upon the always quiet town ; lights twinkled gaily from the casements of surrounding villas ; like a string of jewels gleamed the lamps of the empty High-street. The slow river wound his sinuous course between the rushes and the willows with scarce a ripple. No sweeter air could have breathed among the leaves, no calmer sky could have o'er-canopied this earth on that night in Verona when young Romeo stole into Capulet's garden under the midnight stars. It was a night made for lovers.

The clock struck the half hour after nine as Geoffrey left the hotel, with his friend's letter in his pocket; assuredly a strange hour in which to visit a lady who had forbidden him to visit her at all. But a man who feels that he is taking a desperate step will hardly stop to consider the details of time or place which may render it a little more or less desperate.

To approach the woman he loved armed with a letter from another man; to bring a stranger's influence to bear upon her who had been deaf to his most passionate pleading; to say to her, 'I myself have failed to touch your heart, but here is my bosom friend's prayer in my behalf: will you grant to his vicarious wooing the grace you have persistently denied to me?'—what could seem madder, more utterly desperate, than such a course as this?

Yet women are doubtless strange creatures—a fact which those classic poets and satirists whose opinions it had been his pleasing task to study had taken pains to impress on Mr. Hossack's mind. He remembered Mrs. Bertram's agitation in that brief scene with Lucius, her exalted sense of gratitude. It was just possible that she really might regard him, even at this hour, as the preserver of her child's life—second only to Providence in that time of trouble.

And if she thought of him thus, his influence might have some weight.

‘Dear old fellow!’ thought Geoffrey affectionately; ‘he wouldn’t let me see the letter. I daresay he has given me no end of a character,—like other written characters, which are generally of the florid order—praised me up to the skies. Will his eloquence move her to pity me, I wonder? I fear not. And I feel odiously caddish, going to deliver my own testimonials.’

If he could have faced Lucius with any grace, it is possible that he would have turned back, even on the very threshold of Mrs. Bertram’s tiny garden. But after bringing his friend down from London, could he be so churlish as to reject his aid, let it be offered in what manner so ever?

He plucked up his courage at sight of the lamp in her window—a gentle light. The upper half of the casement was open, and he heard the dreamy arpeggios of one of Mendelssohn’s Lieder played by the hand whose touch even his untutored ear knew so well. In another minute he was admitted by a neat little servant, who opened the door of the parlour unhesitatingly, and ushered him straightway in, assured that he had come to propose a new pupil, and regarding him as the harbinger of fortune.

‘ A gentleman, if you please ’m, to see you.’

Mrs. Bertram rose from the piano, the graceful figure he knew so well, in the plain black dress, just as he had seen her the first time at the morning concert in Manchester-square—a certain lofty pose of the head, the dark eyes looking at him with a grave steady look, after just one briefest flash of glad surprise, just one faint quiver of the perfect lips.

‘ Mr. Hossack !’

‘ Yes, I know you have forbidden me to call upon you, and yet I dare to come, at this unseasonable hour, in defiance of your command. Forgive me, Mrs. Bertram, and for pity’s sake hear me. A man cannot go on living for ever betwixt earth and heaven. A time has come when I feel that I must either leave this place, and,’ with a faint tremble in his voice, ‘ all that makes it dear to me, or remain to be happier than I am—happy, at least, in the possession of some sustaining hope. You remember my friend Davoren—’

Remember him ! Her cheek blanched even at the mention of his name.

‘ The doctor who came down to see your daughter ?’

‘ Yes,’ she said, looking at him strangely ; ‘ I am not likely to forget Mr. Davoren.’



‘ You are too grateful for a trifling service. Well, Davoren, my dear old friend, the best and truest friend I have, is here again.’

‘ Here !’ she cried, looking towards the door as if she expected to see it open to admit him. ‘ O, I should so like to see him again.’

‘ He will be only too proud to call upon you to-morrow ; but in the mean time he— Mrs. Bertram, you must forgive me for what I am going to say. Remember, Davoren is my friend, as near and dear to me as ever brother was to brother. I have told him the story of my hopeless love—’

‘ O, pray, pray, not that subject !’ she said, with a little movement of her hand, half in warning, half entreaty.

‘ I have told him all,’ continued Geoffrey, undeterred by that deprecating gesture, ‘ and he has written to you, believing that his influence might move you a little in my favour. You will not refuse to read his letter, will you, Mrs. Bertram, or feel offended by his interference ?’

‘ No,’ she said, holding out her hand to receive the letter ; ‘ I can refuse him nothing.’

She betrayed neither surprise nor anger, but read the letter, which was somewhat long, with deepest interest. Her countenance, as she read, watched

closely by her lover, betrayed stronger emotion than he had ever yet seen in that inscrutable face. Tears gathered on her eyelids ere she had finished, and at the end a half-stifled sob burst from that proud bosom.

‘*His* eloquence has more power than mine,’ said Geoffrey, with kindling jealousy.

‘He pleads well,’ she answered, with a slow sad smile—‘pleads as few men know how to plead for another. He urges me to be very frank with you, Mr. Hossack ; bids me remember the priceless worth of a heart as true and noble as that you have offered me ; entreats me, for the sake of my own happiness and of yours, to tell you the wretched story of my past life. And if, when all is told, wisdom or honour counsels you to leave me, why,’ with a faint broken laugh, ‘you have but to bid me good-bye, and go away, disenchanted and happy.’

‘Happy without you ! Never ; nor do I believe your power to disenchant me.’

‘Do not promise too much. My—this letter bids me do what, of my own free will, I never could have done—tell you the story of my life. Perhaps I had better write to you ; yet no, it might be still more difficult. I will tell you all, at once. And then hate

me or despise me, as you will. You must at least remember that I have never courted your love.'

'I know that you have been the most cruel among women, the most inexorable—'

'I was not so once, but rather the weakest. Hear my story, as briefly, as plainly as I can tell it. Years ago I was a guest at a great lady's house—a visitor among people who were above me in rank, but who were pleased to take a fancy to me, as the phrase goes, because I had some little talent for music. I sang and played well enough to amuse them and their guests. The lady was an amateur, raved about music, and delighted in bringing musical people about her. Among her favourites when I visited her was one who had a rare genius—a man with whom music was a second nature, whose whole being seemed to be absorbed by his art. Violinist, pianist, organist, with a power of passionate expression that gave a new magic even to the most familiar melodies, he seemed the very genius of music. I heard him, and, like my patroness, was enchanted. She was amused to see my delight; threw us much together; wove a little romance out of our companionship; made us play and sing together; and in a word, with the most innocent and kindly intentions, prepared the way for my deepest misery.'

‘You loved this mam!’ cried Geoffrey, ready to hate him on that ground.

‘Loved him! I thought so then. There are times when I believe I never really loved him, that the glamour which he cast around me was only the magic of his art. But for the time being my mind was utterly subjugated by his influence; I had no thought but of him, and, fascinated by his genius, deemed him worthy of a self-sacrificing love. He was a creature of mystery—a mere waif and stray, admitted to the house where I met him on no better recommendation than his genius. He had the manners and education of a gentleman, the eccentricities of an artist. He asked me to be his wife, disregarded my refusal, pursued me with an unwearied persistence, and, aided by the wondrous power of his genius, triumphed over every argument, conquered every opposition, wrung from me my consent to a secret union. It would be useless to repeat his specious statements—his pretended reasons for desiring a secret marriage. I was weak enough, wicked enough, to consent to the arrangement he proposed; but not until after many a bitter struggle.’

‘Why pain yourself by these wretched memories?’ exclaimed Geoffrey. ‘Tell me nothing except that you will be my wife. I will take all the rest upon

trust. There is no such thing as truth or purity in woman if you are not worthy of an honest man's love.'

'You shall hear me to the end,' she answered quietly, 'and then pronounce whether I am or not. The house in which we were visitors was only two miles from a cathedral city. He of whom I have been speaking—'

'Mr. Bertram.'

'I will call him Bertram, although I am bound to tell you that name is not the true one. Mr. Bertram proposed a marriage before the registrar in the cathedral town. We both had been long enough resident in the neighbourhood for the necessary notice. Indeed, that notice had been given some days before I gave my most reluctant consent. At the last, harassed by Mr. Bertram's importunity, loving him with a girl's first romantic fancy, and believing that I was the object of a most devoted love, without an adviser or friend at hand to whom I could appeal, conscious that I was guilty of ingratitude and disobedience towards the dearest and best of parents, I suffered myself to be hurried into this wretched union. We walked across the park early one morning, and went to the registrar's office, where the brief form was gone through, and my lover told

me I was his wife. I went home that very day, for the necessity of a fortnight's notice to the registrar had deferred the marriage to the last day of my visit. I went back to the parents who loved and trusted me, weighed down by the burden of my guilty secret.'

'Was Mr. Bertram's rank superior to yours? and was that his reason for secrecy?' asked Geoffrey.

'He made me believe as much. He told me that he hazarded position and fortune by marrying me, and I believed him. I was not quite nineteen, and had been brought up in a small country town, brought up by people to whom falsehood was impossible. You may suppose that I was an easy dupe. Some time after my return he appeared in our little town. I implored him to tell my father and mother, or to let me tell them of our marriage. He refused, giving me his reasons for that refusal; using the same arguments he had employed before, and to which I was obliged to submit, reluctantly enough, Heaven knows. But when he claimed me as his wife, and reminded me that I was bound to follow his fortunes, I refused to obey. I told him that the marriage before the registrar had to me seemed no marriage at all, and that I would never leave home and kindred for his sake until I had stood before God's altar by his side. This, which he called a mere school-girl prejudice,



made him angry ; but after a time he gave way, and told me that I should be satisfied. He would marry me in my father's church, but our union must not the less remain a secret. He had a friend, a curate in a London parish, who would come down to perform the ceremony quietly one morning, without witnesses. The marriage before the registrar was ample for all legal purposes, he told me. This marriage in the church was to be only for the satisfaction of my conscience, and it mattered not how informal it might be. No witnesses would be wanted, no entry need be made in the Register.'

'Never shall I forget that day—the empty church wrapt in shadow, the rain beating against the great window over the altar, the face of the stranger who read the service, the dreary sense of loneliness and helplessness that crept about my heart as I stood by the side of him for whom I was now to forsake all I had loved. Never, surely, was there a more mournful wedding. I felt guilty, miserable, despairing, my heart at this last hour clinging most fondly to those from whom I was about to sever myself, perhaps for life. When the service ended, the stranger who had read it looked at me in a curious way and left the church, after a little whispered talk with my husband. When he had gone, Bertram went straight to the

organ—that organ on which he had played for many an hour during the last few weeks—and struck the opening chords of the “Wedding March.”

“Come, Janet,” he cried, “let us have our triumphal music, if we have no other item in the pageantry of a wedding.”

‘He played, as he always played, like a man who, for the time being, lived only in music; but for my overburdened heart even that magic had no soothing influence. I left the organ-loft, and went down-stairs again. Here, in the dimly-lighted aisle, I almost stumbled against the stranger who had read the marriage-service.

“I was anxious to see you,” he began, in a nervous hesitating way, and very slowly—“anxious to be assured that all was right. You have been already married before the registrar, your husband informs me, and this ceremonial of to-day is merely for the satisfaction of your own conscience; yet I am bound to inform you—”

‘The last notes of the “Wedding March” had pealed out from the old organ before this, and I heard my husband’s footstep behind me as the stranger spoke. He came quickly to the spot where we stood, and put my arm through his.

“I thought I told you, Leslie, that my wife has



had the whole business fully explained to her," he said.

‘The stranger muttered something which sounded like an apology, bowed to me, wished my husband good-bye, and hurried away. If he had come back to the church to give me friendly counsel or timely warning, he quitted it with his intention unfulfilled.

‘I left my father’s house secretly at daybreak next morning, half heartbroken. I have no excuse to plead for this wicked desertion of parents who had loved me only too well; or only the common excuse that I loved the man who tempted me away from them—loved him above duty, honour, self-respect. I left the dear old home where I had been so happy, conscious that I left it under a cloud. Only in the future could I see myself reëstablished in the love and confidence of my father and mother; but Mr. Bertram assured me that future was not far off. Of the bitter time that followed, I will speak as briefly as possible. Mine was a wretched wandering life, linked with a man whom I discovered but too soon to be utterly wanting in honour or principle; a life spent with one whose only profession was to prey upon his fellow-men; who knew no scruple where his own advantage was in question; whom I soon

knew to be relentless, heartless, false to the very core. Heaven knows it is hard to say all this of one I had so deeply loved, for whom I had hazarded and lost so much. Enough that the day came when I could no longer endure the dishonour of association with him; when I felt that I would sooner go out into the bleak world of which I knew so little, and commit my own fate and my child's to the mercy of God, than share the degradation of a life sustained by fraud. I told my husband as much: that finding all my endeavours to persuade him to alter his mode of life worse than useless, since they led only to bursts of scornful anger on his part, I had resolved to leave him, and live as I best might by my own industry, or, if God pleased, starve. He heard my decision with supreme indifference, and turning to me with the bitter smile I knew so well, said:

“I congratulate you on having arrived at so wise a decision. The matrimonial fetters have galled us both. I thought you a clever woman, and a fitting helpmeet for a man who has to live by his wits. I find you a puling fool, with a mind cramped by the teaching of a country parsonage. Our union has been a mistake for both; but I am happy to inform you that it is not irrevocable. Our marriage before the registrar and our marriage in the church are

alike null and void; for I had a wife living at the time, and, for aught I know, have still.”’

‘The consummate scoundrel,’ cried Geoffrey, with a smothered curse; ‘but why do you tell me these things? why torture yourself by recalling them? However wronged by this villain, in my eyes you are purest among the pure.’

‘I have little more to tell. He took the initiative, and left me with my child in furnished lodgings in a garrison town, where he had found profitable society among the officers of the regiment then quartered there, and had distinguished himself by his skill at billiards. He left me penniless, and at the mercy of the lodging-house-keeper, to whom he owed a heavy bill. I will not trouble you with the details of my life from this point. Happily for me, the woman was merciful. I freely surrendered the few trinkets I possessed, and she suffered me to depart unmolested with my own and my child’s small stock of clothes. I removed to humbler lodgings, gave lessons in music and singing, struggled on, paid my way, and after some time left the town with my child and came straight to London, glad to be lost in that ocean of humanity. I had heard before this of the death of both my parents—heard with a remorseful grief which I shall continue to suffer till my dying day: the sin

of ingratitude such as mine entails a lifelong punishment. I was therefore quite alone in the world. I think if it had not been for my little girl I could hardly have survived so much misery, hardly have faced a future so hopeless. But that one tie bound me to life—that sweet companionship made sorrow endurable—lent a brightness even to my darkest days. I have no more to tell; God has been very good to me. All my efforts have prospered.’

‘I know not how to thank you for this confidence,’ said Geoffrey, ‘for to my mind it removes every barrier between us, if you only can return, in some small measure, the love I have given you, and which must be yours till the end of my life.’

‘You forget,’ she said sadly, ‘he who is in my estimation my husband still lives; or, at least, I have had no evidence of his death.’

‘What! you would hold yourself bound by a tie which he told you was worthless?’

‘I swore before God’s altar, in my father’s church, to cleave to him till death should part us. If he perjured himself, there is no reason why I should break my vow. I left him because to live with him was to participate in a life of fraud and dishonour, but I hold him not the less my husband. If you have any doubt of the story I have told you, the books of the

registrar at Tyrrelhurst, in Hampshire, will confirm my story.'

'If I doubt you!' cried Geoffrey. 'I am as incapable of doubting you as you are of falsehood. But for Heaven's sake abandon this idea of holding by a marriage which was from first to last a lie!'

Then followed passionate pleading, met by a resolution so calm, yet so inflexible, that in the end Geoffrey Hossack felt his prayers were idle, and farther persistence must needs degenerate into persecution.

'Be it so!' he exclaimed at last, angry and despairing; 'you have been consistently cruel from the first. Why did you suffer me to love you, only to break my heart? Since it must be so, I bid you farewell, and leave you to the satisfaction of remaining true to a scoundrel.'

He hurried from the room and from the house, not trusting himself with a last look at the face which had wrought this fever in his brain; rushed away through the tranquil summer night, neither knowing nor caring where he went, but wandering on by the grassy banks that followed the sinuous river, by farm and homestead, lock and weir, under the shadow of hill and wood. It was nearly three hours after midnight when the sleepy Boots admitted

Mr. Hossack to the respectable family hotel, and Lucius Davoren was waiting for him, full of anxiety and even fear.

‘If I had known anything of this place, I should have come out in search of you, Geoffrey,’ he said. ‘It isn’t the kindest thing in the world to ask a man to come down here to see you, and then leave him for five mortal hours under the apprehension that you have come to an untimely end.’

Geoffrey wiped the travel stains from his forehead with a long-drawn sigh.

‘I was too down-hearted to come straight home,’ he said, ‘so I went for a walk. I suppose I walked a little too far, but don’t be angry, old fellow. I’m as nearly broken-hearted as a man can be.’

‘Did she tell you all?’

‘Everything; a dismal story, but one that proves her to be all I have ever believed her—sinned against but sinless. And now, Lucius, can you explain how it was that your letter could influence her to do what she would have never done for my sake?’

‘Easily. You have proved yourself a true-hearted fellow, Geoffrey, and I’ll trust you with a secret—Mrs. Bertram is my sister.’

‘Your sister?’ cried Geoffrey, with supreme astonishment.

‘Yes, the sister whose name I have not uttered for years, but whom I have never ceased to love. My sister Janet, who left her home eight years ago under a cloud of mystery, and whose wrongs I then swore to avenge.’

‘How long have you known this—that my Mrs. Bertram and your sister were one and the same person?’

‘Only since I came to Stillmington to see the little girl.’

‘Then this explains her emotion that night. Thank God! Dear old Lucius—and now, as you love her, as you love me, your friend and companion in the days of our youth—use your influence with her, persuade her to abandon all memory of that villain, to blot him out of her life as if he had never been.’

‘I have tried that already, and failed. I thought your love might accomplish what my arguments could not achieve. I fear the case is hopeless. But my duty as a brother remains, to find this man, if possible, and ascertain for myself whether the marriage was legal or not. He may have told Janet that story of another wife out of pure malice.’



## CHAPTER XV.

### THE BEGINNING OF A MYSTERY.

LUCIUS had a long interview with Mrs. Bertram on the following morning, and he and Geoffrey left Stillmington together in the afternoon; to the despair of the proprietor of the family hotel, who had not had such a customer as Mr. Hossack for many years, not even during that halcyon period which he spoke of fondly as 'our 'untin' season.' They travelled to London by the same express-train, having a long and friendly talk on the way, Geoffrey *en route* for Christiana, with a view to shooting grouse among the Norwegian hills, and if it were possible in some measure to stifle the pangs of hopeless love in the keen joys of the sportsman; Lucius to return to the beaten round of a parish doctor's life, brightened only by those happy hours which he spent in the old house with Lucille.

It was too late to visit Cedar House on the evening of his return from Stillmington, so Lucius and Geoffrey dined, or supped, together at the Cosmo-



politan, and had, what the latter called, 'a gaudy night;' a night of prolonged and confidential talk rather than of deep drinking, however; for Lucius was the most temperate of men, and with Geoffrey pleasure never meant dissipation. They talked of the future; and hope kindled in Geoffrey's breast as they talked. Not always would Fate be inexorable; not always would the woman he loved be inaccessible to his prayers.

'I could hardly bear my life if it were not for one fond hope,' he said; 'and even that is, perhaps, a delusion. I believe that she loves me.'

'I know she does,' replied Lucius; and the two men grasped hands across the table.

'She has told you!' cried Geoffrey, rapture gleaming in his honest face.

'She has told me. Yes, Geoffrey, a love such as yours deserves some recompense. My sister confessed that you had made yourself only too dear to her; that but for the tie which she deems binding until death she would have been proud to become your wife.'

'God bless her! Yes, I have been buoyed up by the belief in her love, and that will sustain me still. Did she tell you nothing of that wretch—her husband—nothing that may serve as a clue for you to hunt him down?'

‘Very little; or very little more than I already knew. She gave me a general description of the man; but she possesses no likeness of him, so even that poor clue is wanting. The name he bore was doubtless an assumed one, therefore that can help us little. But the strangest part of all this strange story is—’

‘What, Lucius?’

‘That the description of this man, Vandeleur—that was the name under which he married my sister—tallies in many respects with the description of another man, whose fate I have pledged myself to discover; a man who had the same genius for music, and was as complete a scoundrel.’

Hereupon Lucius told his friend the story of his engagement to Lucille Sivewright, and the condition attached to its fulfilment, to which Geoffrey lent an attentive ear.

‘You say this man sailed for Spanish America in the year ’53. Your sister was married in ’58. How, then, can you suppose that Lucille’s father and the man calling himself Vandeleur are one and the same person?’

‘There would have been ample time for Sivewright to have grown tired of America between ’53 and ’58.’

‘ So there might. Yet it seems altogether gratuitous to suppose any identity between the two men. Musical genius is not so exceptional a quality ; nor is scoundrelism the most uncommon of attributes to be found among the varieties of mankind.’

They discussed the subject at length in all its bearings. It was a relief to Lucius to unburden his mind to the friend he loved and trusted ; the chosen companion of so many adventures ; the man whose shrewd sense he had never found wanting in the hour of difficulty. They talked long and late, and Lucius slept at the Cosmopolitan, and returned to the Shadrack district at an hour when the domestics of that popular hotel were only just opening their weary eyelids on the summer morning.

He spent his day in the accustomed round of toil ; had double work to do in consequence of his brief holiday ; found the atmosphere of the Shadrack-road heavy and oppressive in the sultry noontide, after the clearer air and bluer skies of the hills and woods round Stillmington. And that all-pervading aspect of poverty which marked the streets and alleys of his parish struck him more keenly after the smug respectability and prosperous trimness of Stillmington’s dainty High-street and newly-erected villas. He travelled over the beaten track somewhat wearily, and

felt ever so little inclined to envy Geoffrey, who was by this time hurrying across the face of the sun-dappled country-side, in the Hull express, on the first stage to Norway. But he was no whit less patient than usual in his attention to the parish invalids; and when the long day was done he turned homeward hopefully, to refresh himself after his labours before presenting himself at Cedar Lodge.

It was dusk when Mrs. Wincher admitted him into the blossomless courtyard. Mr. Sivewright had retired for the night, but Lucille was at work in the parlour, Mrs. Wincher informed him, with her protecting air.

‘You never come anigh us yesterday, nor yet the day before, Dr. Davory,’ she said, ‘and Mr. Sivewright was quite grumptions about it — said as he began to feel you was neglecting of him. “It serves me right,” he said, “for believin’ as any doctor would go on caring for his patient without the hope of a fee;” but I took him up sharp enough, and told him he ought to know you’d never looked at your attendance here from a fanatical pint of view.’

‘Meaning financial, I suppose, Mrs. Wincher?’

‘O lor, yes, if you like it better pernounced that way. I gave it him up-right and down-straight, you may be sure.’

‘It was very good of you to defend the absent. Nothing but absolute necessity would have kept me away from this house even for two days. Has Miss Sivewright been quite well?’

Mrs. Wincher hesitated before replying, and Lucius repeated his question anxiously.

‘Well, yes; I can’t say as there’s been anythink amiss with her. Only yesterday evening,’ here Mrs. Wincher dropped her voice, and came very close to him, with a mysterious air, ‘between the lights—blind man’s holiday, as my good gentleman calls it in his jocosse way—she gave me a bit of a turn. She’d been walking in the garden, and down by that blessed old wharf, where there’s nothink better than stagnant mud and strange cats for anybody to look at, and it might be just about as dark as it is now, when she came past the window of the boothouse, where I happened to be scouring my saucepans and such-like; for the work do get behindhand in this great barrack of a place. You know the boothouse, don’t you, Dr. Davory,—the little low building with the peaky roof, just beyond the laundry?’

‘Yes, I know. Go on, pray.’

‘Well, she came past the window, looking so pale and strange, with her hands clasped upon her forehead, as if she’d been struck all of a heap by somethink

as had frightened her. I bounced out upon her sudding, and I suppose that scared her all the more ; for she gave a little skreek, and seemed as if she'd have dropped on the ground. "Lor, Miss Lucille," says I, "it's only me. What in goodness name's the matter?" But she turned it off in her quiet way, and said she'd only felt a little dull and lonesome-like without you. "Miss Lucille," says I, "you look for all the world as if you'd seen a ghost." And she looks at me with her quiet smile, and says, "People do see ghosts sometimes, Wincher ; but I've seen none to-night ;" and then all of a sudding she gives way, and busts out crying. "Astaricall," says I ; and I takes her into the parlour, and makes her lie down on the sofa, and biles up the kittle with half a bundle of wood, and makes her a cup of tea, and after that she comes round again all right. You mustn't let out to her that I've told you about it, Dr. Davory ; for she begged and prayed of me not to say a word, only I thought it my bonding duty to tell you.'

'And you were right, Mrs. Wincher. No, I'll not betray you. This dismal old house is enough to blight any life. How I wish I could take her to a brighter home without delay !'

'I'm sure I wish you could,' answered Mrs. Wincher heartily ; 'for I must say there never was a



house that less repaid the trouble of cleaning, or weighed heavier on the spirits.'

This little exchange of confidences had taken place in the forecourt, where Mrs. Wincher had detained Mr. Davoren while she disburdened her bosom of its weight.

Lucius went straight to the parlour, where Lucille was seated before a formidable pile of household linen—table-cloths in the last stage of attenuation, sheets worn threadbare, which she was darning with a sublime patience. She looked up as Lucius entered the room, and a faint flush lighted up the pale face at sight of her lover. Yet, despite her pleasure at his return, he saw that she had changed for the worse during his brief absence. The transient glow faded from her cheek, and left her paler than of old; the hand Lucius held in both his own was burning with a slow fever.

'My dearest,' he said anxiously, 'has anything been amiss in my absence?'

'Was not your absence itself amiss?' she asked, with the faintest possible smile. 'I have been very dull and very sad without you; that is all.'

'And you have fretted yourself into a fever. O, Lucille, end all difficulties; make no impossible conditions, and let me take you away from this great

lonely house very soon. I cannot give you the fair home we have talked about yet awhile—it may even be long before prosperity comes to us; but all that patience and courage can do to achieve fortune, I will do for your dear sake. I would not ask you to share debt or poverty, Lucille; I would not urge you to link your fate with mine if I did not see my way to a secure position, if I had not already the means of providing a decent home for my sweet young bride.’

‘Do you think that the fear of poverty has ever influenced me? No, Lucius, you must know me better than that. But I will not let you burden yourself too soon with a wife. Believe me, I am more than content. I am very happy in my present life, for I see you nearly every day. And I would not leave my poor old grandfather in his declining years. Let us think of our marriage as something still a long way off—in that happy future which it is so sweet to talk and dream about. Only, Lucius,’ she went on in a faltering tone, and with a downward look in the eyes that were wont to meet his own so frankly, ‘you spoke just now of my having imposed too hard a condition upon you—you meant, of course, with regard to my father?’

‘Yes, dear.’



‘I have been thinking a great deal about this subject in your absence, and have come to see it in a new light. The condition was too difficult; forget that I ever imposed it. I am content to know no more of my father’s fate than I know already.’

‘This change is very sudden, Lucille.’

‘No, it is not sudden. I have had ample time for thought in these two long days. I had no right to ask so much of you. Let my father’s fate be what it may, neither you nor I could have power to alter it.’

It happened somewhat strangely that this release was not altogether welcome to Lucius. He had thought his mistress unreasonable before; he thought her capricious now.

‘I have no desire in this business except to obey you,’ he said somewhat coldly. ‘Am I to understand, then, that I am absolved from my promise? I am to make no farther effort to discover Mr. Sivewright’s fate.’

‘No farther effort. I renounce altogether the idea of tracing out my father’s life.’

‘You are content to remain in utter ignorance of his fate—not to know whether he is living or dead?’

‘He is in God’s hands. What could my feeble help do for him?’

‘And after cherishing the idea of finding him all these years, you abandon the notion at once and for ever?’

‘Yes. You think me changeable—frivolous, perhaps?’ with a faint sigh.

‘Forgive me, Lucille. I cannot help thinking you just a little capricious. I am naturally very glad to be released from the task you imposed upon me, which I felt was almost impossible. Yet I can but wonder that your opinions should undergo so complete a change. However, I do not question the wisdom of your present decision. I have placed the business in the hands of Mr. Otranto, the detective. You wish me to withdraw it—to forbid farther inquiries on his part.’

‘Yes! It will be better so. He is not likely to discover the truth. He would only raise false hopes, to end in bitter disappointment.’

‘His manner was certainly far from hopeful when I put the case before him. But these men have an extraordinary power of hunting up evidence. He might succeed.’

‘No, no, Lucius. He would only lure you on to spend all your hard-earned money, and fail at last. Tell him your inquiry is at an end. And now let us say no more about this painful subject. You are not

angry with me Lucius, for having caused you so much trouble?’

‘It is impossible for me to be angry with you, Lucille,’ answered the surgeon; and then followed the foolish lovers’ talk, at which Mrs. Wincher (presently appearing with the supper tray, whereon was set forth a banquet consisting of a plate of hard biscuits and a tumbler of London milk, for Lucille’s refreshment), assisted in her capacity of duenna and guardian angel, for half an hour of unalloyed bliss; after which she escorted Lucius to the grim old gate, like a state prisoner led across the garden of the Tower on his way to execution.

‘I shall come early to-morrow to see your grandfather,’ said Lucius to Lucille at parting.

He went home lighter-hearted than usual. It was a relief to be rid of that troublesome search for a man who seemed to have vanished utterly from human ken. He wrote to Mr. Otranto, the detective, that very night, bidding him abandon the inquiry about Ferdinand Sivewright.

Mr. Sivewright received his medical attendant with a somewhat fretful air next morning, and Lucius was both shocked and surprised to discover that a change for the worse had occurred in his patient during his absence. There was a touch of fever that

was new to the case—a nervous depression, such as he had not found in the invalid for some time past. But this change seemed the effect of mental excitement rather than of physical weakness.

‘Why did you leave me so long?’ asked Mr. Sive-wright peevishly. ‘But I am a fool to ask such a question. I pay you nothing, and it is not likely you would allow any consideration for my comfort to stand in the way of your pleasures.’

‘I have not been taking pleasure,’ answered Lucius quietly, ‘nor could I give you more honest service than I do now were you to pay me five hundred a year for my attendance. Why are you always so ready to suspect me of sordid motives?’

‘Because I have never found mankind governed by any other motives,’ replied the old man. ‘However, I daresay I wrong you. I like you, and you have been very good to me; so good that I have come to lean upon you as if you were indeed that staff of my age which I ought to have found in a son. I am glad you have come back. Do you believe in sinister influences, in presentiments of approaching misfortune? Do you believe that Death casts a warning shadow across our path when he draws near us?’

‘I believe that invalids are fanciful,’ answered

Lucius lightly; 'you have been thinking too much during my absence.'

'Fanciful!' repeated Mr. Sivewright with a sigh, 'yes, it may have been nothing more than a sick man's fancy. Yet I have seemed to feel a shadowy presence in this house—the unseen presence of an enemy. There have been strange sounds too in the long sleepless night—not last night, all was quiet enough then—but on the previous night; sounds of doors opening and shutting; stealthily opened, stealthily closed, but not so quietly done as to cheat my wakeful ears. Once I could have sworn that I heard voices; yet when I questioned both the Winchers next morning they declared they had heard nothing.'

'Did you say anything to Lucille about these noises?'

'Not a word. Do you think I would scare that poor lonely child? No, the house is dreary enough. I won't put the notion of ghosts or other midnight intruders into her head; girls' brains are quick enough to grow fancies.'

'There was wisdom in that reserve,' said Lucius; and then he went on thoughtfully, 'The noises you heard were natural enough, I have no doubt. Old houses are fruitful of phantoms; doors loosely fast-

ened, old locks that have lost their spring ; given a strong wind, and you have a ghostly promenade.'

'But there was no wind the night before last. The air was hot and sultry. I had my window open all night.'

'And you may therefore have imagined the noises in yonder road to be sounds proceeding from the interior of this house. Nothing is so deceptive as the sense of hearing, especially in nervous subjects.'

'No, Davoren, I made no such mistake. Nothing you or any one else can say will convince me that I did not hear the shutting of the heavy outer door, a door in the back premises that opens upon the garden. I should, perhaps, have thought less of this fact, strange and alarming as it is in itself, were it not for my own feelings. From the hour in which I heard those sounds I have had an overpowering sense of approaching evil. I feel that something, or some influence inimical to myself, is near at hand, overshadowing and surrounding my life with its evil power. I feel almost as I felt twelve years ago, when I woke from my drugged sleep to find that my son had robbed me.'

'The delusion of an overwrought brain,' said Lucius. 'I must give you a sedative that will insure better sleep.'

‘No, for pity’s sake,’ cried the old man eagerly, ‘no opiates. Let me retain my natural sense to the last. If there is danger at hand I need it all the more.’

‘There can be no such thing as danger,’ said Lucius; ‘but I will examine the fastenings of that back door, and of all other external doors, and, if necessary, have the locks and bolts made more secure.’

‘The locks and bolts are strong enough. You need waste no money on them. I used to fasten all the doors myself every night before my illness.’

‘You have every reason to trust the Winchers, I suppose?’

‘As much reason as I can have to trust any human being. They have served me upwards of five-and-twenty years, and I have never yet found them out in any attempt to cheat me. They may have been robbing me all the time, nevertheless, as my son robbed me, and may wind up by cutting my throat.’

‘A crime that would hardly repay them for their trouble, I imagine,’ said Lucius, with his thoughtful smile, ‘since you possess nothing but your collection, and the assassins could hardly dispose of that.’

‘Perhaps not. But they may think that I am



rich—in spite of all I have ever told them of my poverty—just as you may think that I am rich, and that the penniless girl you have chosen may turn out a prize by and by.’

‘ I have no such thought,’ answered Lucius, meeting his patient’s cunning look with the calm clear gaze of perfect truth ; ‘ wealth or poverty can make no difference in my love for your granddaughter. For her own sake I might wish that she were not altogether portionless ; for mine I can have no such desire. I value no fortune but such as I can win for myself.’

‘ You speak like a proud man, and a foolish one into the bargain. To say you do not value money is about as wise as to say you do not value the air you breathe ; for one is almost as necessary to existence as the other. What does it matter who makes the money, or how it is made, so long as it finds its way to your pocket ? Will a sovereign buy less because it was scraped out of a gutter ? Is wealth one whit the less powerful though a man crawls through the dirt to win it ? Let him squeeze it from the sweat and toil of his fellow men, it carries no stain of their labour. Let him cheat for it, lie for it, betray his brother or abjure his God for it, his fellow men will honour him none the less, so long as he has enough



of it. The gold won on a racecourse or at a gaming-table, though broken hearts and ruined homes went along with it, has as true a ring as your honourable independence, by whatever inspiration of genius or toil of brain you may earn it.'

'You speak bitterly, like a man who has been accustomed to contemplate humanity "the seamy side without,"' said Lucius coldly; 'but be assured I have never calculated on being enriched by the fruits of your industry.'

'Not even upon finding yourself the inheritor of my collection?' inquired Mr. Sivewright, his keen eyes peering into the surgeon's face.

'I have not even aspired to that honour,' replied Lucius, with a somewhat contemptuous glance at the outer shell of painted canvas, inscribed with hieroglyphics, which encased the defunct Pharaoh.

'So much the better,' said the old man. 'I should be sorry to think you might be disappointed by and by, when this shrunken form is clay, and you come to grope among my art treasures, thinking to find some hidden hoard—the miser's hoard of slowly-gathered wealth which he loved too well to spend, and yet was obliged to leave behind him at the last.'

Lucius looked at the speaker curiously. The old man's pale gray eyes shone with a vivid light; his

thin tremulous hands were spread above the bed-clothes, as if they had been stretched over a pile of gold, protecting it from a possible assailant.

‘Yes,’ thought Lucius, ‘I have often fancied this man must be a miser; I am sure of it now. Those words, that gesture, tell their own story. In spite of all his declarations to the contrary, he is rich, and these groundless fears spring from the thought of some concealed hoard which he feels himself powerless to protect.’

He felt some pity, but more contempt, for the subject of these thoughts, and no elation at the idea that this hoarded wealth might possibly descend to him. He did his best to soothe the old man’s excited nerves, and succeeded tolerably well. He had taken up his hat, and was on the point of hurrying off to begin his daily round—delayed considerably by the length of this interview—when Mr. Sivewright called him back.

‘Will it trouble you to return here after your day’s work?’ he asked.

‘Trouble me? very far from it. I had counted on spending my evening with Lucille—and you, if you are well enough to be plagued with my company.’

‘You know I always like your company. But

to-night I have something to do; some papers that I want to look over, of no particular importance either to myself or those that come after me; old documents connected with my business career and what not. But I want to set my house in order before I leave it for a narrower one. Now, Davoren, I want you to hunt up some of these papers for me. I have sent that old fumbler, Jacob Wincher, to look for them, but the man is purblind, I suppose, for he did not succeed in finding them. They are in an old oak cabinet in a loft where I keep the dregs of my collection. Lucille will show you the place. Here is the key—the lock is a curious one—and the papers are stowed away in odd corners of the cabinet; inner drawers which brokers call secret, but which a child might discover at the first glance. Bring me all the papers you find there.'

'Do you wish me to make the search now, sir, or in the evening?'

'In the evening, of course. It is a business to be done at your leisure. But you must have daylight for it. Come back as early as you can, like a good fellow; I have a fancy for looking over those papers to-night. Heaven only knows how many days remain to me.'

'The same doubt hangs over the lives of all of

us,' answered Lucius. 'Your case is by no means alarming.'

'I don't know that. I have a presentiment of evil, an instinctive apprehension of danger, like that which all nature feels before the coming of a storm.'

## CHAPTER XVI.

### AN UNPLEASANT DISCOVERY.

THE thought of this conversation with Mr. Sivewright followed Lucius all through the day's work. He meditated upon it in the intervals of his toil, and that meditation only tended to confirm him in his opinion as to the lonely old man. Soured and embittered by his son's ingratitude, Homer Sivewright had consoled himself by the indulgence of that passion which is of all passions the most absorbing—the greed of gain. As he beheld his profits accumulate he became more and more parsimonious; surrendered without regret the pleasures for which he had no taste; and having learned in his poverty to live a life of hardship and deprivation, was contented to do without luxuries and even comforts which had never become necessary to his existence. Thus the sole delight of his days had been the accumulation of money, and who could tell how far the usurer's exorbitant profits had gone to swell the tradesman's

honest gains? The art collection might have been little more than a cover for the money-lender's less reputable commerce.

Thus reasoned Lucius. He returned to Cedar House at about five in the afternoon, having dined hastily at a coffee-house in the Shadrack-road, in the midst of his day's work.

He found the table in the spacious old parlour laid for tea, and drawn into one of the open windows. Lucille had contrived, even with her small means, to give a look of grace to the humble meal. There were a few freshly-cut flowers in a Venetian goblet, and some fruit in an old Derby dish; the brown loaf and butter and glass jar of marmalade had a fresher and daintier look than anything Mrs. Babb the char-woman ever set before her master. Lucius thought of the fair surroundings that wealth could buy for the girl he loved; thought how easy their lives would be if he were only rich enough to give her the home he dreamed of, if there were no question of waiting and patience. True that he might give her some kind of home—a home in the Shadrack district—at once, but was it such a shelter as he would care to offer to his fair young bride? Would it not be a dreary beginning of wedded life?

Yes, Mr. Sivewright's hoarded wealth might give

them much, but could he, Lucius, as an honest man, feel any satisfaction in the possession of a fortune gained in such crooked ways as the miser treads in his ruthless pursuit of gold? He tried to put all thought of that possible wealth out of his mind. That way lay temptation, perhaps dishonour; for in his mind it was impossible to disassociate the miser's wealth from the means by which it had been amassed.

Lucille had the same pale troubled look which had alarmed him on the previous evening, but this he ascribed to a natural anxiety about her grandfather. He did his best to cheer her, as they drank tea together at the little table by the open window, ministered to by the devoted Wincher, whose bonnet hovered about them throughout the simple meal.

'She's fidgety about the old gentleman, poor child,' said Mrs. Wincher. 'I'm sure she's been up and down that blessed old staircase twenty times to-day, that restless she couldn't settle to nothink. And he is a bit cranky I'll allow, not knowing his own mind about anythink, and grumbling about as beautiful a basin of broth as was ever sent up to a ninvalid. But sickness is sickness, as I tell our missy, and she mustn't be surprised if sick folks is contrary.'

When Mrs. Wincher had departed with the tea-



tray, Lucius told Lucille of the search he had undertaken for Mr. Sivewright.

‘My grandfather told me about it,’ she said. ‘I am to show you the cabinet in the loft. He would have sent me up to fetch the papers alone, he said, only there is so much lumber crowded together that he doubted if I should be able to get at the cabinet. We had better go at once before the light begins to fade, for it is rather dark up there.’

‘I am ready, dear.’

Lucille produced a great bunch of rusty keys from the desk at which Mr. Sivewright had been wont to transact the mysterious business of his retirement, and they went up the old staircase side by side in the afternoon sunlight, which had not yet begun to wane. The wide corridor which led to the invalid’s room, with the doors of other rooms on either side of it, was familiar enough to Lucius; but he had never yet ascended above this story, and Lucille had told him that the upper floor was a barren desert—the undisputed territory of mice and spiders. She unlocked a door which opened on a narrow flight of stairs—the steep steps worn by the tread of departed generations, and of various levels. This staircase brought them to the topmost story, above which rose the loft they had to explore. The ceiling of the land-

ing on this upper floor was low, blotched and swollen here and there with the rain of many a winter, the dilapidated roof being in some parts little better than a filter. There were curious old panelled doors on either side of this landing, which was lighted by one melancholy window, across whose narrow panes the spider had woven her cloudy tapestries.

‘Are all those rooms empty?’ asked Lucius, looking at the numerous doors.

‘Yes,’ answered Lucille hurriedly. ‘My grandfather fancied the floors unsafe, and would put nothing into them. Besides, he had room enough down-stairs. The things he has stowed away in the roof are things upon which he sets no value—mere rubbish which almost any one else would have given away. Come, Lucius.’

There was a steep little staircase leading up to the loft, only one degree better than a ladder. This they mounted cautiously in semi-darkness, and then Lucius found himself in a vast substantially floored chamber, just high enough in the clear to admit of his standing upright, and amidst a forest of massive beams leaning this way and that, evidently the roof of a house built to defy the grim destroyer Time.

For some moments all was darkness; but while Lucius was striving to pierce the gloom, Lucille

raised a sloping shutter in the centre of the roof, and let in a burst of western sunlight. Then he beheld the contents of the place—a chaos of ancient lumber, the wreck of time. It was like standing among the bruised and battered timbers of a sunken vessel at the bottom of the sea.

The objects around him were evidently the merest waste and refuse of a large and varied collection—broken armchairs, dilapidated buffets, old oak-carving in every stage of decay, odd remnants of mildewed and moth-eaten tapestry, fragments of shattered plaster casts ; the head of a Diana, crescent crowned, lying amidst the tattered remains of a damask curtain ; an armless Apollo, leaning lopsided and despondent of aspect against an odd leaf of a Japanese screen ; old pictures whose subjects had long become inscrutable to the eye of man ; stray cushions covered with faded embroidery, which had once issued bright and glowing from the fair hands that wrought it—on every side the relics of perished splendour, the very dust and sweepings of goodly dwellings that had long been empty. A melancholy picture, suggestive of man's decay.

Lucille peered into the shadows which filled the angles of the loft, in quest of that oaken cabinet, of which she had but a faint remembrance.

‘It used to stand in the back-parlour in Bond-street when I was a child,’ she said. ‘Yes, I remember, a curious old thing, with the figures of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel. There are little folding-doors that open the gates of Eden, with the angel and his flaming sword. There are carvings on each side; on one side the expulsion from Paradise, on the other the death of Abel. See, there it is, behind that pile of pictures.’

Lucius looked in the direction she indicated. In the extreme corner of the loft he saw a clumsy cabinet of the early Dutch school, much chipped and battered, with several old frameless canvases propped against it. He clambered over some of the more bulky objects which blockaded his way, cleared a path for Lucille, and after some minutes’ labour they both reached the corner where the cabinet stood.

The western light shone full upon this corner. The first task was to remove the pictures, which were thickly coated with dust, and by no means innocent of spiders. Lucille drew back with a shudder and a little girlish scream at the sight of a black and bloated specimen of that tribe.

Lucius put aside the pictures one by one. They were of the dingiest school of art, old shopkeepers doubtless, for which Mr. Sivewright had vainly striven

to find a customer. Here and there an arm or a head was faintly visible beneath the universal brown of the varnish, but the rest was blank. It was, therefore, with considerable surprise that Lucius perceived beneath this worthless lumber a picture in a frame, and, by the appearance of the canvas, evidently modern. He turned it gently to the light, and saw—What? The face of the man he killed in the pine forest.

Happily for Lucius Davoren, he was kneeling on the ground, and with his back to Lucille, when he made this discovery. A cry of surprise, pleasure, terror, he knew not which, broke from her lips as he turned that portrait to the light; but from his there came no sound.

For the moment the blow stunned him; he knelt there looking at the too-well-remembered face—the face that had haunted him sleeping and waking—the face that he would have given years of his life utterly to forget.

It was the same face; on that point there could be no shadow of doubt. The same face in the pride of youth, the bloom and freshness of early manhood. The same keen eyes; the same hooked nose, with its suggestion of affinity to the hawk and vulture tribe; the unmistakable form of the low brow, with its

strongly marked perceptives and deficiency in the organs of thought ; the black hair, growing downward in a little peak ; the somewhat angular brows.

‘ My father’s portrait,’ said Lucille, recovering quickly from that shock of surprise. ‘ To think that my grandfather should have thrust it out of sight, here amongst all this worthless rubbish. How bitterly he must have hated his only son !’

‘ *Your father!*’ cried Lucius, letting the picture drop from his nerveless hands, and turning to Lucille with a face white as the plaster head of Diana. ‘ Do you mean to tell me that man was your father ?’

‘ My dear father,’ the girl answered sadly ; ‘ my father, whom I shall love to the end of my life, whom I love all the better for his misfortunes, whom I pity with all my heart for the ill fate that changed his father’s natural affection into a most unnatural hate.’

She took up the portrait, and carried it to a clearer spot, where she laid it gently down upon an old curtain.

‘ I will find a better place for it by and by,’ she said. ‘ It was too cruel of my grandfather to send it up here. And I have so often begged him to show me a picture of my father.’

‘ I wonder you can remember his face after so

long an interval,' said Lucius, who had in some measure regained his self-possession, though his brain seemed still full of strange confused thoughts, amidst which the one horrible fact stood forth with hideous distinctness.

The man he had slain yonder was the father of the woman he loved. True that the act had been a sacrifice, and not a murder; the execution of ready-handed justice upon a criminal, and not an act of personal revenge. But would Lucille ever believe that? She who, in spite of all her grandfather's dark hints and bitter speeches, still clung with a fond belief to the father she had loved. She must never know that fatal deed in the western wilderness; never learn what a wretch man becomes when necessity degrades him to the level of the very beasts against which he fights the desperate fight for life. Take from man civilisation and Christianity, and who shall say how far he is superior, either in the capacity to suffer or in kindness of nature, to the tiger he hunts in the Indian jungle, or the wolf he shoots in the Canadian backwoods? And this was the man whose fate, until last night, he had stood pledged to discover; the man whose lost footsteps he was to have tracked through the wilderness of life. Little need of inquiry. This man's troubled history



had been brought to an abrupt ending, and by the seeker's rash hand.

'Come,' said Lucille anxiously; 'we must find those papers for my grandfather. He will not rest unless he has them this evening.'

Lucius began his task without another word; he could not trust himself to speak yet awhile. He unfastened the clumsy folding-doors of the cabinet, with a hand that trembled a little in spite of his effort to be calm, and opened the drawers one after another. They came out easily enough, and rattled loosely in their frames, so shrunken was the wood. Outer drawers and inner drawers, and papers in almost all of them—some were mere scrappy memoranda, scrawled on half sheets or quarter sheets of letter paper; other documents were in sealed envelopes; others were little packets of letters, two or three together, tied with faded red tape. Lucius examined all the drawers and minute cupboards, designed, one would suppose, with a special view to the accumulation of rubbish; emptied them of their contents, tied the papers all together in his handkerchief, and gave them into the custody of Lucille. The light had faded a little by the time this was done, and the corners of the loft were wrapped in deepening shadow—a gruesome ghostly place to be

left alone in by this half light. Lucille looked round her with a shudder as she turned to leave it.

They were on the perilous staircase—Lucius in front, Lucille behind him, half supported by his uplifted arm, both obliged to stoop to avoid knocking their heads against the low sloping ceiling—when Lucius saw and heard something sufficiently startling.

In the half dusk of the landing below them, he saw the door of one of those empty rooms which Lucille had declared to be locked opened—ever so little way—and then closed again quickly but softly, as if shut by a careful hand. He distinctly saw the opening of the door; he distinctly heard the noise of the lock.

‘Lucille,’ he said, in an eager whisper, ‘you are wrong. There is some one in that room—the door exactly facing these stairs. Look.’

He pointed, and her eyes followed the direction of his finger. For a few moments she stood speechless, looking at the door with a scared face, and leaning upon him more heavily than before.

‘Nonsense, Lucius! you are dreaming. There can be no one there; the rooms are empty; the doors are all locked.’

‘I am quite certain, dearest,’ he answered, still in a whisper, and with his eyes fixed upon the door

that had opened, or seemed to open. 'Don't be alarmed; it may be nothing wrong. It is only old Wincher prowling about this floor, I daresay, just as he prowls about the down-stair rooms. I'll soon settle the question.'

'I tell you, Lucius, the doors are all locked,' cried Lucille, in a tone far louder than her wonted accents—a voice of anger or of alarm.

Lucius tried the door with a strong and resolute hand—shook it till it rattled in its time-worn frame. It was locked certainly, but locked on the inside. The keyhole was darkened by the key.

'It is locked on the inside, Lucille,' he said; 'there is some one in the room.'

'Impossible! Who should be there? No one ever comes up to this floor. There is nothing here to tempt a thief, even if thieves ever troubled this house. I keep the keys of all these rooms. Pray come down-stairs, Lucius. My grandfather will be impatient about those papers.'

'How can that door be locked on the inside if you have the key of it?'

'I have not the key of that particular door. There is a door of communication between that room and the next, and I keep one locked on the inside. It saves trouble.'

‘Let me see the two rooms; let me satisfy myself that all is right,’ he said, stretching out his hand for the keys.

‘I will not encourage any such folly,’ answered Lucille, moving quickly towards the staircase leading to the lower story. ‘Pray bring those papers, Lucius. I could not have imagined you were so weak-minded.’

‘Do you call it weak-minded to trust my own senses? And I have a special reason for being anxious upon this point.’

She was on her way down-stairs by this time. Lucius lingered to listen at the door, but no sound came from the room within. He tried all the doors one after another: they were all locked. He knelt down to look through the keyholes. Two of the rooms were darkened by closed shutters, only faint gleams of light filtering through the narrow spaces between them. One was lighter, and in this he saw an old bedstead and some pieces of dilapidated furniture. It looked a room which might have been used at some time for a servant’s bedroom.

After all, that opening and shutting of the door had been, perhaps, a delusion of his over-wrought mind. Only a few minutes before there had been a noise like the spinning of a hundred Manchester cot-

ton-looms in his brain. The horror and anguish of that hideous discovery in the loft still possessed him as he descended those stairs: what more likely than that, in such a moment, his bewildered senses should cheat him?

And could he doubt Lucille's positive assurance as to the condition of those rooms? Could he doubt her whose truth was the sheet-anchor of his life? Or could he mistrust her judgment whose calm good sense was one of the finest qualities of her character?

Had it not been for Homer Sivewright's strange story of noises heard in the dead of the night, he could have dismissed the subject far more easily. As it was he lingered for some time; listening for the faintest sound that might reach his ear, and hearing nothing but the scamper of a mouse within the wainscot, the fall of a dead fly from a spider's web.

He found Lucille waiting for him in the corridor below, very pale, and with an anxious look, which she tried to disguise by a faint smile.

'Well,' she asked, 'you have kept me waiting long enough. Are you satisfied now?'

'Not quite. I should very much like to have the keys of yonder rooms. Such a house as this is the very place to harbour a scoundrel.'

The girl shuddered, and drew back from him with a look of absolute terror.

‘Don’t be frightened, Lucille. I daresay there is no one there; a strange cat, perhaps, at most; yet cats don’t open and shut locked doors. There may be no one; only in such a house as this, so poorly occupied by two helpless women and two feeble old men, one cannot be too careful. Some notion of your grandfather’s wealth may have arisen in the neighbourhood. His secluded eccentric life might suggest the idea that he is a miser, and that there is hoarded money in this house. I want to be assured that all is secure, Lucille; that no evil-intentioned wretch has crept under this roof. Give me your keys and let me search those rooms. It will only be the work of a few minutes.’

‘Forgive me for refusing you anything, Lucius,’ she said; ‘but my grandfather told me never to part with those keys to any one. You know his curious fancies. I promised to obey him, and cannot break my promise.’

‘Not even for me?’

‘Not even for you. Especially as there is not the slightest cause for this fancy of yours. That staircase door is kept always locked, the keys locked up in my grandfather’s desk. It is impossible that any

living creature could go up to that attic-floor without my knowledge. Nor is it possible for any one to get into the lower part of the house unseen by me or by the Winchers.'

'I don't know about that. It would be easy enough for any one to get from the wharf to the garden. There are half-a-dozen doors at the back of the house, and more than a dozen places in the stables and outhouses where a man might lie hidden, so as to slip into the house at any convenient moment.'

'You forget how carefully Mrs. Wincher turns all the keys, and draws all the bolts at sunset. Pray be reasonable, Lucius, and dismiss this absurd fancy from your mind. And instead of standing here with that solemn face, arguing about impossibilities, come to my grandfather's room with those papers.'

Never had she spoken more lightly. Yet a minute ago her cheek had been blanched, her eye dilated by terror. Lucius gave a little sigh of resignation and followed her along the corridor. After all it was a very foolish thing that he had been doing; raising fears, perhaps groundless, in the breast of this lonely girl. Her grandfather had studiously refrained from any mention of his suspicions lest he should alarm Lucille. Yet he, the lover, had been so reckless as



to suggest terrors which might give a new pain to her solitary life.

Mr. Sivewright received the bundle of papers with evident satisfaction, and turned them over with hands that trembled in their eagerness.

‘Documents of no moment,’ he said; ‘a few old records of my business life, put away in that disused piece of lumber up-stairs, and half forgotten. But when, at the gates of the tomb, a man reviews his past life, it is a satisfaction to be able to try back by means of such poor memorials as these. They serve to kindle the lamp of memory. He sees his own words, his own thoughts written years ago, and they seem to him like the thoughts and words of the dead.’

He thrust the papers into a desk which was drawn close to his bed-side.

‘You have been better to-day, I hope?’ said Lucius, when Lucille had left the room in quest of the old man’s evening meal.

‘No; not so well. I don’t like your new medicine.’

‘My new medicine is the medicine you have been taking for the last five weeks—a mild tonic, as I told you. But you are tired of it, perhaps. I’ll change it for something else.’

‘Do. I don’t like its effect upon me.’

And then he went on to state symptoms which seemed to indicate increasing weakness, nausea, lassitude, and that unreasonable depression of mind which was worse than any physical ailment.

‘It seems like a forecast of death,’ he said dependently.

Lucius was puzzled. For some time past there had been a marked improvement, but this change boded no good. The thread of life had been worn thin; any violent shock might snap it. But Lucius had believed that in supreme rest and tranquillity lay the means of recovery. He could not vanquish organic disease; but he might fortify even a worn-out constitution, and make the sands of life drop somewhat slower through the glass.

To the patient he made light of these symptoms, urged upon Mr. Sivewright the necessity of taking things quietly, and above all of not allowing himself to be worried by any groundless apprehensions.

‘If you have a notion that there is anything going wrong in this house, let me sleep here for a few nights,’ said Lucius. ‘There are empty rooms enough to provide lodgings for a small regiment. Let me take up my quarters in one of them—the room next this one, for instance. I am a light sleeper;

and if there should be foul play of any kind, my ear would be quick to discover the intruder.'

'No,' said the old man. 'It is kind of you to propose such a thing, but there's no necessity. It was a nervous fancy of mine, I daresay; the effect of physical weakness. Say no more about it.'

Lucius went home earlier than usual that evening, much to the amazement of Mrs. Wincher, who begged him to give them a 'toon' before departing. This request, however, was not supported by Lucille. She seemed anxious and restless, and Lucius blamed his own folly as the cause of her anxiety.

'My dearest,' he said tenderly, retaining the icy-cold hand which she gave him at parting, 'I fear those foolish suspicions of mine about the rooms upstairs have alarmed you. I was an idiot to suggest any such idea. But if you have the faintest apprehension of danger, let me stay here to-night and keep guard. I will stay in this room, and make my round of the house at intervals all through the night. Let me stay, Lucille. Who has so good a right to protect you?'

'O no, no,' she cried quickly, 'on no account. There is not the slightest occasion for such a thing. Why should you suppose that I am frightened, Lucius?'

‘Your own manner makes me think so, darling. This poor little hand is unnaturally cold, and you have not been yourself all this evening.’

‘I am a little anxious about my grandfather.’

‘All the more reason that I should remain here to-night. I can stay in his room if you like, so as to be on the spot should he by any chance grow suddenly worse, though I have no fear of that.’

‘If you do not fear that, there is nothing to fear. As to your stopping here, that is out of the question. I know my grandfather wouldn’t like it.’

Lucius could hardly dispute this, as Mr. Sive-wright had actually refused his offer to remain. There was nothing for him to do but to take a lingering farewell of his betrothed, and depart, sorely troubled in spirit.

He was not sorry when the old iron gate closed upon him. Never till to-night had he left the house that sheltered Lucille without a pang of regret, but to-night, after the discovery of the portrait in the loft, he felt in sore need of solitude. He wanted to look his situation straight in the face. This man—the man his hand had slain—was the father of his promised wife. The hand that he was to give to Lucille at the altar was red with her father’s blood. Most hideous thought, most bitter fatality which had

brought that villain across his path out yonder in the trackless forest. Was this world so narrow that they two must needs meet—that no hand save his could be found to wreak God's vengeance upon that relentless savage?

Her father! And in the veins of that gentle girl, who in her innocent youth had seemed to him fair and pure as the snowdrop unfolding its white bells from out a bed of newly-fallen snow, there ran the blood of that most consummate scoundrel! All his old theories of hereditary instincts were at fault here. From such a sire so sinless a child! The thought tortured him. Could he ever look at that sweet pensive face again without conjuring up the vision of that wild haggard visage he had seen in the red glare of the pine-logs, those hungry savage eyes, gleaming athwart elf-locks of shaggy hair, and trying to find a strange distorted likeness between the two faces?

And this horrible secret he must keep to his dying day. One hint, one whisper of the fatal truth, and he and Lucille would be sundered for ever. Did honour counsel him to confess that deed of his in the forest? Did honour oblige him to tell this girl that all her hopes of reunion with the father she had loved so dearly were vain; that his hand had made a sudden end of that guilty life, cut off the sin-

ner in his prime, without pause for repentance, without time even to utter one wild appealing cry to his God? True that the man had declared himself an infidel, that he was steeped to the lips in brutish selfishness, grovelling, debased, hardened in sin. Who should dare say that repentance was impossible, even for a wretch so fallen? Far as the east is from the west are the ways of God from the ways of man, and in His infinite power there are infinite possibilities of mercy and forgiveness.

‘I was mad when I did that deed,’ thought Lucius; ‘mad as in the time that followed when I lay raging in a brain fever; yet, Heaven knows, I believed it was but stern justice. There was no tribunal yonder. We were alone in the wilderness with God, and I deemed I did but right when I made myself the instrument of His wrath. All that followed that awful moment is darkness. Schanck never spoke of that villain’s fate, nor did I. We instinctively avoided the hideous subject, and conspired to hide the secret from Geoffrey. Poor, good-natured old Schanck! I wonder whether he has found his way back from the Californian gold-fields. If I had leisure for such a pilgrimage, I’d go down to Battersea and inquire. I doubt if a rough life among gold-diggers would suit him long.’

## Book the Second.

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### CHAPTER I.

#### GEOFFREY BEGINS A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY.

NOT very far did Geoffrey Hossack proceed upon his Norwegian voyage. At Hull he discovered that—perusing his Bradshaw with a too rapid eye, and a somewhat disordered mind—he had mistaken the date of the steamer's departure, and must waste two entire days in that prosperous port, waiting for the setting forth of that vessel. Even one day in that thriving commercial town seemed to him intolerably long. He perambulated King William-street and the market-place, Silver-street, Myton-gate, Low-gate, and all the gates; stared at the shipping; lost his way amidst a tangle of quays and dry docks and wet docks and store-houses and moving bridges, which were for ever barring his way; and exhausted the resources of Kingston-upon-Hull in the space of



two hours. Then, in very despair, he took rail to Withernsea, and dined at a gigantic hotel, where he was ministered to by a London waiter, who provided him with the regulation fried sole and cutlet. Having washed down these too familiar viands with two or three glasses of Manzanilla, he set forth in quest of a solitude where to smoke his cigar in communion with that vast waste of waters—the German Ocean—and his own melancholy thoughts.

Go to Norway ; try to forget Janet Bertram amid those lonely hills, with no companions save the two faithful lads who carried his guns, and performed the rough services of life under canvas ? Try to forget her amidst the solitude of nature ? Vain hope ! An hour's contemplation of the subject on that lonely shore, remote from the parade and the band and all the holiday traffic of a popular watering-place, was enough to make a complete change in Mr. Hossack's plans. He would not go to Norway. Why should he put the North Sea betwixt himself and his love ? Who could tell what might happen in his absence, what changes might come to pass involving all his chances of happiness, and he, dolt and idiot, too far away to profit by their arising ? No ; he would stay in England, within easy reach of his idol. He might write her a little line now and then, just to remind

her of the mere fact of his existence, and to acquaint her with his abode. She had not forbidden him to write. Decidedly, come what might, he would not leave England.

This decision arrived at, after profound cogitation, he breathed more freely. He had been going forth like an exile—unwillingly, as if driven by Nemesis, that golden-winged goddess who made such hard lines for the Greeks. He had set forth in the first rush and tumult of his passion, deeming that in the wild land of the Norse gods he might stifle his grief, find a cure for his pain. He felt more at ease now that he had allowed love to gain the victory. ‘It is a privilege to inhabit the same country with her,’ he told himself:

Not long did he linger in Hull. The next morning’s express carried him back to London, uncertain as to how he should spend his autumn; willing even to let his guns rust so that he need not drag himself too far away from Janet Bertram.

‘Janet,’ he repeated fondly, ‘a prettier name than Jane; a name made for simplest tenderest verse. I’m glad I have learnt to think of her by it.’

There were letters waiting for him at the Cosmopolitan, forwarded from Stillmington, nearly a week’s arrears of correspondence; letters feminine

and masculine; the feminine bulky, ornamental as to stationery, be-monogramed, redolent of rose and frangipani; cousinly epistles which Geoffrey contemplated with a good-humoured indifference.

He looked over the addresses eagerly, lest by remotest chance—yet he could not even hope so much—there might be a letter from Mrs. Bertram. There was none; so he opened one of the cousinly epistles with a profound sigh.

Hillersdon Grange, Hampshire. *Her* county and his. He and Lucius had been born and bred not twenty miles apart, and had begun their friendship at Winchester School. Mr. Hossack's people lived in Hampshire, and were unwearying in their invitations, yet he had not revisited his native place since his return from America.

'I can't understand why a man should be attached to the place where he was born,' he used to say in his careless fashion when his cousins reproached him for his indifference. 'In the first place, he doesn't remember the event of his birth; and in the second, the locality is generally the most uninteresting in creation. Wherever you go, abroad or at home, you are always dragged about to see where particular people were born. You knock your head against the low timbers of Shakespeare's birthplace at Strat-

ford ; you go puffing and panting up to a garret to see where Charlotte Corday was first admitted to the mystery of existence ; you drive through Devonshire lanes to stare at the comfortable homestead where Raleigh blinked at life's morning sun ; you mount a hill to admire the native home of Fox ; you go stages out of your way to contemplate the cradle of Robespierre. And when all that a man loved in his boyhood lies under the sod, and the home where he spent his early life seems sadder than a mausoleum, people wonder that he is not fond of those empty rooms, haunted by the phantoms of his cherished dead, simply because he happened to be born in one of them.'

Thus had argued Mr. Hossack when his cousins reproached him with his want of natural affection for the scenes of his childhood. Hillersdon Grange was within three miles of Homefield, where Geoffrey's father had ended his quiet easy life about ten years ago, leaving his only son orphaned but remarkably well provided for. Squire Hossack of Hillersdon was the elder scion of the house, and owner of a handsome landed estate, and the Miss Hossacks were those two musically-disposed damsels whom it had been Geoffrey's privilege to escort to various concerts and matinées in the winter season last past.

The letter now in Geoffrey's hand was from the elder of the damsels, a hard-riding good-looking young woman of four-and-twenty, who kept her father's house, domineered over her younger sister, and would have had no objection to rule Geoffrey himself with the same wise sway.

Her letter was a new version of the oft-repeated invitation. 'Papa says, if you don't come to us this year, he shall think you have quite left off caring about your relations, and declares he really never will ask you again,' she wrote. 'It does seem a hard thing, Geoffrey, that you can go scampering about the world, and living in all manner of outlandish places—Stillmington, for instance, a place which I am told is abominably dull out of the hunting season, and what you can have found to amuse you all these months in such a place, I can't imagine—and yet, excuse the long parenthesis, can't find time to come to us, although we are so near dear old Homefield, which you must be attached to, unless your heart is much harder than I should like to suppose it. The birds are plentiful this year, and papa says there are some snipe in Dingley marsh. Altogether he can promise you excellent sport after the first of next month.

'But if you want to oblige Jessie and me' (Jessie

was the younger sister) 'you will come at once, as there are to be grand doings at Lady Baker's next week; and eligible young men being scarce in this neighbourhood, we should be glad to have a good-looking cousin to show off. Papa escorts us, of course; but as he always contrives to get among the old fogies who talk vestry and quarter-sessions, we might almost as well be without any escort at all. So do come, dear Geoff, and oblige your always affectionate cousin,

ARABELLA HOSSACK.

'P.S. Please call at Cramer's, Chappell's, and a few more of the publishers before you come, and bring us down anything they may recommend. Jessie wants some really good songs, and I should like Kalbé's fantasias upon the newest Christy melodies.'

Lady Baker! Lucius had named this lady as one of the friends of his sister Janet; one of the county people whose notice had been the beginning of the fatal end. It was at Lady Baker's house that Janet had met the villain who blighted her life.

This was an all-sufficient reason for Geoffrey's prompt acceptance of his cousin's invitation. It was only by trying back that he could hope to discover the after-life of that man who had called himself Vandeleur, only by going back to the very beginning that



he could hope to track his footsteps to the end. Could he but discover this scoundrel's later history, and find it end in a grave, what happiness to carry the tidings of his discovery to Janet, and to say, 'I bring you your freedom, and I claim you for my own by the right of my devotion!'

He knew that she loved him. That knowledge had power to comfort and sustain him in all the pain of severance. True love can live for a long time upon such nutriment as this.

He wrote to Lucius, telling him where he was going, and what he was going to do, and started for Hillersdon next morning, laden with a portmanteau full of new music for those daughters of the horse-leech, his cousins.

Hillersdon Grange was, as Geoffrey confessed with the placid approval of a kinsman, 'not half a bad place' for an autumn visit. The house was old, a fine specimen of domestic architecture in the days of the Plantagenets. It had been expanded for the accommodation of modern inhabitants; a ponderous and somewhat ugly annex added in the reign of William the Third; a cloister turned into a drawing-room at a later period—as the requirements of civilised people grew larger. The fine old hall, with its open roof, once the living room of the mansion, was



now an armoury, in which casques that had been hacked at Cressy, and hauberks that had been battered in the Wars of the Roses, were diversified by antlers and stuffed stags' heads, the trophies of the hunting field in more pacific ages.

The Hossacks were not an old family. They could not boast that identity with the soil which constitutes rural aristocracy. They had been bankers and merchants in days gone by, and their younger sons were still merchants, or bankers. Geoffrey's father, and the Squire of Hillersdon Grange, had succeeded, one to the patrimonial acres, acquired a few years before his birth; the other to the counting-house and its wider chances of wealth. Both had flourished. The Squire living the life that pleased him best, farming a little in a vastly expensive and vastly unprofitable fashion; writing a letter to the *Times* now and then about the prospects of the harvest, or the last discovery in drainage; quoting Virgil, sitting at quarter-sessions, and laying down parochial law in the vestry. The younger making most money, working like a slave, and fancying himself the happier and the better man; to be cut off in his prime by heart-disease or an over-worked brain, while Geoffrey was a lad at Winchester.

The grounds at Hillersdon were simply perfec-

tion. The place was on the borders of the New Forest, and the Squire's woods melted into that wider domain. A river wound through the park, and washed the border of the lawn; a river which had shadowy willow-sheltered bends where trout abounded, rushy coves and creeks famous for jack, a river delightful alike to the angler and to the landscape painter.

'Not half a bad place,' said Geoffrey, yawning and looking at his watch on the first morning after his arrival; 'and now, having breakfasted copiously upon your rustic fare—that dish of cutlets *à la Sou-bise* was worthy of mention—may I ask what I am to do with myself? Just eleven! Three hours before luncheon! Do you do anything in the country when you are not eating or sleeping?'

This inquiry was addressed to the sisters Belle and Jessie—good-looking young women, with fine complexions, ample figures, clear blue eyes, light brown hair, and the freshest of morning toilets, in the nautical style, as appropriate to the New Forest—wide blue collars flung back from full white throats, straw hats bound with blue ribbon, blue serge petticoats festooned coquettishly above neat little buckled shoes, with honest thick soles for country walking; altogether damsels of the order called 'nice,' but in no

manner calculated to storm the heart of man. Good daughters in the present, good wives and mothers, perhaps, in the future, but not of the syren tribe.

‘I don’t suppose Hillersdon is much duller than the backwoods of America,’ said Arabella, the elder, with some dignity; ‘and I hope you may be able to endure life until the 1st with no better company than ours.’

‘My dearest Belle, if you and Jessie had paid me a visit on the banks of the Saskatchewan, I should have been unutterably happy, especially if you had brought me a monstrous hamper of provisions — a ham like that on the sideboard for instance, and a few trifles of that kind. I didn’t mean to depreciate Hillersdon; the hour and a half or so I spent at the breakfast table was positively delightful. But the worst of what people call the pleasures of the table is that other pleasures are apt to pall after them. Perhaps the best thing you could do would be to drive me gently about the park in your pony carriage till luncheon. I don’t suppose for a moment that I shall be able to eat any more at two o’clock; but the country air *might* have a revivifying effect. One can but try.’

‘You lazy creature! drive you indeed!’ exclaimed Jessie. ‘We’ll do nothing of the kind. But I tell

you what you shall do if you like—and of course you will like—you shall be coxswain of our boat, and we'll row you up to Dingley.'

'*You'll row? Ah, I might have known those blue collars meant something rather desperate. However, steering a wherry isn't very hard labour, as the burlesque writers would say. I'll come.*'

The sisters were delighted. A good-looking cousin to damsels in a rural district is like water-brooks in a dry land. In their inmost hearts these girls doated on Geoffrey, but artfully suppressed all outward token of their affection. Many a night during the comfortable leisure of hairbrushing, when their joint maid had been dismissed, had the sisters speculated on their cousin's life, wondering why he didn't marry, and whom he would marry, and so on; while the real consideration paramount in the mind of each was, '*Will he ever marry me?*'

They strolled across the lawn (not a croquet lawn of a hundred and twenty feet square, after the manner of 'grounds' attached to suburban villas, but a wide undulating tract of greensward, shaded here and there by groups of picturesque old trees—maple and copper beech, and ancient hawthorns on which the berries were beginning to redden) to a Swiss boathouse with pointed gables and thatched roof, ample room for a

small flotilla below, and a spacious apartment above—a room which, had young men been dominant in the household, would doubtless have been made a *tabagie* or a billiard room, but which, under the gentler sway of young ladies, had been gaily decorated with light chintz draperies and fern cases, innocent-looking maple furniture, easels, piano, and workbaskets.

That winding river reminded Geoffrey of the weedy ditch at Stillmington on which he had spent many a summer afternoon, pulling against the stream with disconsolate soul, thinking of his implacable divinity. He gave a little sigh, and wished himself back in Stillmington; to suffer, to hope, to despair—only to be near her.

‘I must make an end of this misery somehow,’ he said to himself, ‘or it will make an end of me.’

‘What a sigh, Geoffrey; and how thoughtful you look!’ exclaimed Jessie, who had an eye which marked every mote in the summer air.

‘Did I sigh? I may have eaten too much breakfast. Look here, Belle, you’d better let me take a pair of sculls, while you and Jessie dabble your hands in the water and talk of your last new dresses. It isn’t good for a man to be idle. I shall have the blues if I sit still and steer.’

‘What a strange young man you are!’ said Belle.

‘Ten minutes ago you wanted to loll in a pony carriage and be driven.’

‘I might have endured the pony carriage, but I can’t endure the boat unless I make myself useful. There, get in please, and sit down. What a toyshop affair! and as broad as a house! I should think the man who built Noah’s Ark must have designed this.’

The sisters exclaimed against this disparagement of their bark, which a local boatbuilder had adorned with all the devices of his art—cane-work, French polish and gilding, crimson damask-covered cushions, dainty cord and tassels—all those prettinesses which the Oxonian, who likes a boat that he can carry on his shoulder, regards with ineffable contempt.

The stream was narrow but deep, and pleasantly sheltered, for the most part, with leafage; the banks clothed in beauty, and every turn of the river disclosing a new picture. But neither Geoffrey nor his companions gave themselves up to the contemplation of this ever-varying landscape. Geoffrey was thinking of Janet Bertram; the girls were wondering what made their cousin so silent.

Mr. Hossack plied his sculls bravely, despite his abstraction, but even in this was actuated less by a desire to gratify his cousins than by a lurking design of his own. Six miles up this very stream lay Mar-



denholme, the mansion of the Bakers. Lady Baker's famous gardens—gardens on which fabulous sums were annually lavished—sloped down to the brim of this very river. If he could row as far as Mardenholme, he might induce the girls to take him in to Lady Baker forthwith, and thus obtain the interview he sighed for. To hope for any confidential conversation with that lady on the day of a great garden party seemed foolish in the extreme; nor did it suit his impatient spirit to wait for the garden party.

'When are these high-jinks to come off at Lady Baker's?' he inquired presently, in his most careless manner.

'Next Tuesday. It's to be such a swell party, Geoffrey—croquet, archery, a morning concert, a German tea, *tableaux vivants*, and a dance to wind up with.'

'*Tableaux vivants*,' said Geoffrey with a yawn; 'the Black Brunswicker and the Huguenot, I suppose. We have grown too æsthetic for the Juan and Haydee, and the Conrad and Medora of one's youth. Are you two girls in the *tableaux*?'

'O dear no,' exclaimed Belle, bridling a little. 'We are not Lady Baker's last mania. We are neighbours, and she always invites us to her large parties, and begs us to come to her Thursday kettledrum, and



is monstrously civil; but in her heart of hearts she doesn't care a straw for humdrum country people. She is always taking up artists and singers and actors, and that kind of thing. She positively raves about *them*.'

'Ah, I've heard something of that before,' said Geoffrey thoughtfully. 'She's musical, isn't she?'

'She calls herself so—goes to the opera perpetually in the London season, and patronises all the local concerts, and gives musical parties—but nobody ever heard her play a note.'

'Ah,' said Geoffrey, 'I don't think people with a real passion for music often do play. They look upon the murder of a fine sonata as a species of sacrilege, and wisely refrain from the attempt, but not the deed, which would confound them. By the way, talking of Lady Baker and her protégées, did you ever hear of a Miss Davoren, who was rather distinguished for her fine voice, some years ago?'

'Yes,' said Belle, 'I have heard Lady Baker rave about her. She was a clergyman's daughter at Wykhamston. And I have heard other people say that Lady Baker's patronage was the ruin of her, and that she left her home in some improper way, and broke her poor old father's heart.'

This little speech sent a sharp pang through an-

other heart, the honest heart that loved the sinner so fondly.

‘You never saw Miss Davoren, I suppose?’

‘Of course not,’ cried Belle. ‘It was before I was out of the nursery.’

‘But you were not blind when you were in the nursery; you might have seen her.’

‘How could I? I didn’t go to Lady Baker’s parties before I was out, and papa doesn’t know many Wykhamston people.’

‘Ah, then you never saw her. Was she pretty?’

‘Perfectly lovely, according to Lady Baker; but all her geese are swans.’

‘She must be a very enthusiastic person, this Lady Baker. Do you think you could contrive to introduce me to her?—to-day, for instance. I can row you down to Mardenholme by one o’clock.’

‘It would be so dreadfully early to call,’ said Jessie, ‘and then, you see, Thursday is her day. But she’s always extremely kind, and pretends to be glad to see us.’

‘Why pretends? She may be really glad.’

‘O, she can’t possibly be glad to see half the county. There must be some make-believe about it. However, she gives herself up to that kind of thing, and I suppose she likes it. What do you think,

Belle? Would it look very strange if we called with Geoffrey?’

‘We might risk it,’ said Belle, anxious to indulge the prodigal. ‘She’s almost sure to be somewhere about the garden if she’s at home. She spends half her life in the garden at Mardenholme.’

‘Then we’ll find her, and approach her without ceremony,’ replied Geoffrey, sending the boat swiftly through the clear water. ‘Depend upon it, *I* shall make myself at home.’

‘We’re not afraid of that,’ answered Belle, who was much more disturbed by the idea that this free-and-easy young man might forget the homage due to a county magnate such as Lady Baker—a personage who in a manner made the rain or fine weather in this part of Hampshire. A summer which her ladyship did not spend at Mardenholme was regarded as a bad and profitless season. People almost wondered that the harvest was not backward, that the clover and vetches came up pretty much the same as usual.

## CHAPTER II.

LADY BAKER.

IT was hardly one o'clock when they beheld the terraced gardens of Mardenholme; gardens that were worth a day's journey to see; a thoroughly Italian picture, set in a thoroughly English landscape; marble balustrades surmounting banks of flowers; tall spire-shaped conifers ranged at intervals, tier above tier; marble steps and marble basins, in every direction; and below this show-garden, sloping down to the river, a lawn of softest verdure, bordered by vast shrubberies, that to the stranger seemed pathless, yet where a fallen leaf could hardly have been found, so exquisite was the order of the grounds.

Geoffrey tied his boat to the lower branch of a mighty willow which dipped its green tresses in the stream, leaped out and landed his cousins as coolly as if he had arrived at an hotel. No mortal was to be seen for the first moment, but Jessie's sharp eyes beheld a white shirt-sleeve gleaming athwart a group of magnolias.

‘There’s a gardener over there,’ she said: ‘we’d better ask him if Lady Baker is in the grounds.’

They made for the gardener, who, with the slow and philosophic air of a man whose wages are not dependent on the amount of his labour, was decapitating daisies that had been impertinent enough to lift their vulgar heads in this patrician domain. This hireling informed them that he had seen her ladyship somewhere about not ten minutes ago. She was in the Chaney temple, perhaps, and he volunteered to show them the way.

‘You needn’t trouble yourself,’ said Jessie. ‘I know the way.’

‘What does he mean by the Chaney temple?’ asked Geoffrey, as they departed.

‘It is a garden-house Lady Baker has had sent over from China,’ answered Belle. ‘I know she’s fond of sitting there.’

They entered a darksome alley in the shrubbery, which wound along the river-bank some little way, opening into a kind of wilderness; a very tame wilderness, inhabited by water-fowl of various tribes, which stretched out their necks and screamed vindictively at the intruders. Here on the brink of the river was the garden-house, an edifice of bamboo and lattice-work, adorned with bells, very much open to

all the winds of heaven, but a pleasant shelter on a sultry day in August. When the breeze shook them, the numerous bells rang ever so faintly, and the sound woke echoes on the farther bank of the stream.

Lady Baker was reclining in a bamboo-chair, reading, with a young lady and gentleman, and a Japanese pug in attendance upon her.

‘Dear Lady Baker,’ cried Belle, anxious to make the best of her unceremonious approach, ‘I hope you won’t think it very dreadful of us to come into the gardens this way like burglars; but my cousin Geoffrey was so anxious to be presented to you, that he insisted on rowing us here this morning.’

‘I do think it extremely dreadful,’ replied the lady with a pleasant laugh. ‘And so this is the cousin of whom I have heard so much. Welcome to Mardenholme, Mr. Hossack. We ought to have known each other long before this, since we are such near neighbours.’

‘I have the honour to possess a small estate not far from your ladyship’s,’ answered Geoffrey; ‘but, being hitherto unacquainted with the chief attraction of the neighbourhood in your person, I have ignorantly given a lease of my place to a retired sugar-broker.’

‘That’s a pity, for I think we should have been

good neighbours. Mr. Hossack, Mrs. Wimple ; Mr. Wimple, Mr. Hossack,' murmured Lady Baker in a parenthesis ; at which introduction the young lady and the young gentleman, newly married, and indifferent to the external world, honoured Geoffrey with distant bows, and immediately withdrew to a trellised balcony overhanging the river, to gaze upon that limpid stream, or, in Geoffrey's modern vocabulary, 'to spoon.' 'You are a wonderful traveller, I understand,' continued her ladyship.

'Hardly, in the modern sense of the word,' said Geoffrey, with becoming modesty. 'I have hunted the bighorn on the Rocky Mountains, and shot grouse in Norway ; but I have neither discovered the source of a river, nor found an unknown waterfall ; in short, as a traveller, I am a very insignificant individual. But as a rule I keep moving, locomotion being about the only employment open to a man to whom Providence has denied either talent or ambition.'

'You are at any rate more modest than the generality of lions, Mr. Hossack,' Lady Baker replied graciously.

She was a little woman, sallow and thin, with a face which in any one less than the mistress of Mardenholme would have been insignificant. But she had fine eyes and teeth, and dressed with the ex-



quisite taste of a woman who studied the fitness of things and not the fashion-book. She had a manner that was at once stately and caressing, and could confer a favour with the air of a princess of the blood royal. She had spent all her life in society, and, except when she slept, knew not what it was to be alone. She could have had but scanty leisure for reading, yet she knew, or seemed to know, everything that society knew. Her detractors declared that she never read anything but the newspapers, and thus, by a zealous study of the *Times* and the critical journals, kept herself far in advance of those stupid people who wade through books. She skimmed the cream of other people's knowledge, shrugged her shoulders in mild depreciation of books she had never read, and wore the newest shades of opinion as she wore the newest colours. For the rest, she was of an uncertain age, had been in society for about a quarter of a century, and looked five-and-thirty. Her light-brown hair, which she wore with almost classic simplicity, as yet revealed no tell-tale streak of silver. Perhaps, like Mr. Mivers in *Kenelm Chillingly*, Lady Baker had begun her wig early.

Sir Horatio Veering Baker, the husband of this distinguished personage, was rather an appanage of her state than an entity. She produced him on

ceremonial occasions, just as her butler produced the parcel-gilt tankards and gigantic rosewater salvers on the buffet; and at other times he retired, like the moon on those dark nights when earth knows not her gentle splendour. He was a mild-faced old man, who devoted his days to various ologies, in which no one but himself and his old servant seemed to take the faintest interest—and the servant only pretended. He inhabited, for the most part, a distant wing of the mansion, where he had a vast area of glass cases for the display of those specimens which illustrated his ologies, and represented the labour of his life. Sometimes, but not always, he appeared at the bottom of his dinner table; and when, among her ladyship's guests, a scientific man perchance appeared, Sir Horatio did him homage, and carried him off after dinner for an inspection of the specimens. Lady Baker was amiably tolerant of her husband's hobbies. She received him with unvarying graciousness when he hobbled into her drawing-room in his dress-coat and antique tie, looking hardly less antediluvian than the petrified jawbone of a megatherium, which was one of the gems in his collection; and she was politely solicitous for his well-being when he pronounced himself 'a little fagged,' and preferred to dine in his study.

Geoffrey soon found himself on the friendliest terms with the mistress of Mardenholme. Lady Baker liked good-looking young men who had no unpleasant consciousness of their good looks, and liked the modern easy manner of youth, provided the ease never degenerated into insolence. She took Geoffrey under her wing immediately, walked nearly a mile with him under the midday sun, protected by a huge white silk umbrella, to show him the lions of Mardenholme; that profound hypocrite, Mr. Hossack, affecting an ardent admiration of ferneries and flower beds, in the hope that this perambulatory exhibition might presently procure him the opportunity for which his soul languished.

‘Let me once find myself alone with this nice old party,’ he said to himself, ‘and I won’t let the chance slip. She shall tell me all she knows about the villain who wronged Janet Davoren.’

To his infinite vexation, however, his cousins, who worshipped the mistress of Mardenholme, followed close upon her footsteps throughout the exposition, went into raptures with every novelty among the ferny tribes, and made themselves altogether a nuisance. Geoffrey was beginning to struggle with dreary yawns when the Mardenholme luncheon gong relieved the situation.

‘And now that I’ve shown you my latest acquisition, let us go to luncheon,’ said Lady Baker, who was never happier than when feeding a new acquaintance. In fact, she liked her friends very much as she liked her orchids and ferns—for the sake of their novelty.

Nobody ever refused an invitation from Lady Baker. It was almost the same thing as a royal command. Jessie and Belle murmured something about ‘papa,’ and the voice of duty which called them back to Hillersdon. But Lady Baker waived the objection with that regal air of hers, which implied that any one else’s inconvenience was a question of smallest moment when her pleasure was at stake.

‘I should be positively unhappy if you went away,’ she said; ‘I have only that Mr. and Mrs. Wimple, whom you just now saw in the garden house. This is their first visit since their honeymoon, and their exhibition of mutual affection is almost unendurable. But as it is a match of my own making I am obliged to tolerate the infliction. They are my only visitors until to-morrow. So if you don’t stop, I shall be bored to death between this and dinner. I actually caught that absurd child, Florence Wimple, in the very act of spelling “you

DARLING" in the deaf-and-dumb alphabet, to that simpleton of a husband of hers across the breakfast table this morning.'

Moved by this melancholy picture, Jessie and Belle consented to remain. Geoffrey had meant to stay from the outset. Indeed, he had landed on the greensward of Mardenholme determined to attain his object before he left.

## CHAPTER III.

### LADY BAKER TELLS THE STORY OF THE PAST.

THE luncheon party was gay enough, in spite of Mr. and Mrs. Wimple's infatuation for each other, which rendered them, as it were, non-existing for the rest of the party. They gazed upon each other with rapt admiring eyes, and handed each other creams and jellies, and smiled at each other upon the smallest provocation. But to-day Lady Baker suffered them to amuse themselves after their own fashion, and gave all her attention to Geoffrey. If he was not distinguished in the realms of art, he was at least an agreeable young man, who knew how to flatter a lady of fashion on the wrong side of forty without indulging in that florid colouring which awakens doubts of the flatterer's good faith. He improved his opportunities at luncheon to such good purpose, that when that meal was over, and the devoted Mr. Wimple had been carried off by his wife and the other two ladies to play croquet, Lady Baker volunteered to show Geoffrey the

Mardenholme picture-gallery—a very fair collection of modern art, which had been acquired by her ladyship's father, a great Manchester man; for it was commerce in soft goods which had created the wealth wherewith this lady had endowed Sir Horatio Veering Baker, and whence had arisen all the splendours of Mardenholme. This was the very thing Geoffrey desired, and for which he had been scheming, with the  *finesse*  of a Jesuit, during the hospitable meal. He had affected an enthusiast's love of art, declaring how, from his earliest youth, he had languished to behold the treasures of the Mardenholme gallery.

Lady Baker was delighted.

'My father lived all his later life among artists,' she said. 'He made his fortune in commerce, as I daresay you have heard; but in heart he was an artist. I myself have painted a little.' (What had Lady Baker not done a little?) 'But music is my grand passion. The pictures were almost all bought off the easel—several of them inspired by my father's suggestions. He was full of imagination. Come, Mr. Hossack, while those foolish people play croquet we will take a stroll in the gallery.'

She led the way through the wide marble-paved hall, whence ascended a staircase of marble, like that noble one in the Duke of Buccleuch's palace at Dal-



keith, and thence to the gallery, a spacious apartment lighted from the roof. It was here Lady Baker gave her concerts and musical kettledrums, to which half the county came to sip black coffee and eat ices and stare at the pictures, while the lady's latest discovery in the world of harmony charmed or excruciated their ears, as the case might be.

To-day this apartment looked delightfully cool and quiet after the sunlit brightness of the other rooms. A striped canvas blind was drawn over the glass roof, gentle zephyrs floated in through invisible apertures, and a tender half-light prevailed which was pleasant for tired eyes, if not the best possible light for seeing pictures.

'I'll have the blinds drawn up,' said Lady Baker, 'and you shall see my gems. There is an ETTY yonder that I would not part with if a good fairy offered me five additional years of life in exchange for it.'

'With so long a lease of life still in hand, five years more or less can seem of no consequence,' said Geoffrey gallantly; 'but I think an octogenarian would accept even a smaller bid for the picture.'

'Flatterer!' exclaimed Lady Baker. 'If you wish to see pictures, you must be good enough to ring that bell, in order that we may get a little more light.'

'A moment, dear Lady Baker,' pleaded Geoffrey;

‘this half-light is delightful, and my eyes are like a cat’s. I can see best in a demi-obscurity like this. Yes, the Etty is charming. What modelling, what chiaroscuro, what delicious colouring!’

‘You are looking at a Frost,’ said Lady Baker, with offended dignity.

‘A thousand pardons. I recognise the delicacy of his outlines, the purity of his colour. But forgive me, Lady Baker, when I tell you that my devotion to art is secondary to my desire to be alone with you!’

Lady Baker looked at him with a startled expression. Was it possible that this young Oxonian had been seized with a sudden and desperate passion for a woman old enough to be his mother? Young men are so foolish; and Lady Baker was so accustomed to hear herself talked of as a divinity, that she could hardly suppose herself inferior in attractiveness to Cleopatra or Ninon de l’Enclos.

‘What do you mean, Mr. Hossack?’

‘Only that, presuming on your ladyship’s well-known nobility of soul and goodness of heart, I am about to appeal to both. Women of fashion have been called fickle, but I cannot think *you* deserve that reproach.’

‘I am not a woman of fashion,’ answered Lady Baker, still very much in the dark; ‘I have lived for

art—art the all-sufficing, the eternal—not for the pretty frivolities which make up the sum of a London season. If I have lived in the midst of a crowd, it is because I have sought intellect and genius wherever they were to be found. I have striven to surround myself with great souls. If sometimes I have discovered only the empty husk where I had hoped to find the precious kernel, it is not my fault.’

‘Would that the world could boast of more such women!’ exclaimed Geoffrey, feeling that he had cleared an avenue to the subject he wanted to arrive at. ‘Amongst your protégées of years gone by, Lady Baker, there was one in whose fate I am profoundly interested. She is the sister of my most valued friend. I speak of Janet Davoren.’

Lady Baker started, and a cloud came over her face, as if that name had been suggestive of painful recollections.

‘O, Mr. Hossack, why do you mention that unfortunate girl’s name? I have been so miserable about her—have even felt myself to blame for her flight, and all the trouble it brought on that good old man her father. He never would confess that she had run away from home; he spoke of her always in the same words: “She is staying with friends in London;” but every one knew there was some sad

mystery connected with her disappearance, and I was only too well able to guess the nature of that mystery. But you speak of her as if you knew her—as if you could enlighten me as to her present position. If it is in your power to do that, I shall be beyond measure grateful to you; you will take a load from my mind.'

'I may be able to do that by and by,' answered Geoffrey; 'at present I can say very little, except that the lady lives, and that her brother is my friend. From you, Lady Baker, I venture to ask all the information you can give me as to those circumstances which led to Miss Davoren's disappearance from Wykhamston.'

Lady Baker sighed and paused before she responded to this inquiry.

'All I can tell you amounts to but little,' she said; 'and even that little is, for the greater part, conjecture or mere guess-work. But what I can tell shall be freely told, and if I can be of any service to that poor girl, either now or in the future, she may rely on my friendship; and, whatever the circumstances of her flight, she shall have my compassion.'

'Those circumstances reflect no shame upon her, Lady Baker,' answered Geoffrey with warmth. 'She was a victim, but not a sinner.'

‘I am most thankful to hear that. And now sit down, Mr. Hossack, and you shall hear my story. I think I can guess the nature of your interest in this lady, in spite of your reserve; and if I can help you towards any good result, I shall be delighted to do so. There are few girls I ever met more worthy of admiration, and, I believe, of esteem, than Janet Davoren.’

They sat down side by side in a recess at the end of the gallery; and here Lady Baker began her story.

‘I first met Miss Davoren,’ she said, ‘at the Castle. The Marchioness had taken her up on account of her fine voice; although Lady Guildford had no more soul for music than a potato; but, like the rest of the world, she likes to have attractive people about her; and so she had taken up Miss Davoren. The dear girl was as beautiful as she was gifted.’

‘She is so still!’ cried Geoffrey with enthusiasm.

‘Ah, I thought I was right!’ said Lady Baker; at which Geoffrey blushed like a girl. ‘Yes, she was positively beautiful; and if she had sat like a statue to be looked at and admired, she would have been an attraction; but her talent and beauty together made her almost divine. My heart was drawn to her at once. I called at Wykhamston vicarage next day, and invited Mr. Davoren and his daughter to my next

dinner-party; and then I asked Janet to spend a long day with me alone—not a creature to be allowed to disturb us—for, as I told her, I wanted really to know her. We spent that day together in my boudoir, giving ourselves up to the delight of music and intellectual conversation. I found Janet all soul; full of imagination and poetry, romantic, enthusiastic, a poet's ideal heroine. I made her sing Mozart's Masses to me until my soul was steeped in melody. In a word, we discovered that there was perfect sympathy between us, and I did not rest till I had persuaded Mr. Davoren to let his daughter come to stay with me. He was averse from this. He talked of the disparity in our modes of life, feared that the luxury and gaiety of Mardenholme would make the girl's home seem poor and dull by comparison; but I overruled his objections, appealed to the mother's pride in her child, hinted at the great things which might come of Janet's introduction to society, and had my own way. Fatal persistence! How often have I looked back to that day and regretted my selfish pertinacity! But I really did think I might be the means of getting the dear girl a good husband.'

'And you succeeded in uniting her to a villain,' said Geoffrey bitterly; then remembering himself he added hastily, 'Pray pardon my impertinence, Lady



Baker, but this is a subject upon which I feel strongly.'

'You foolish young man!' exclaimed Lady Baker in her grand way, that air of calm superiority with which she had gone through the world, the proud serenity of mind which accompanies the possession of unlimited means. 'Do you think if I had not read your secret at the very first that I should take the trouble to tell you all this? Well, the dear girl came to stay with me. I was charmed with her. Sir Horatio even liked her, although he rarely takes notice of any one unconnected with ologies. He showed her his specimens, recommended her to study geology—which he said would open her mind—and made himself remarkably pleasant whenever he found her with me.'

Lady Baker paused, sighed thoughtfully, and then took up the thread of her recollections.

'How happy we were! I should weary you if I described our intercourse. We were like girls together, for Janet's society made me younger. I felt I had discovered in this girl a mind equal to my own, and I was not too proud to place myself on a level with her. I had very few people with me when she first came, and we lived our own lives in perfect freedom, wandering about the grounds—it was in



early summer—staying up till long after midnight listening to that dear girl's singing, and thoroughly enjoying ourselves. One afternoon I drove Janet in my pony carriage to Hillsleigh, where I daresay you know there is a fine old Gothic church, and a still finer organ.'

'I can guess what is coming,' said Geoffrey, frowning.

'Yes, it was at Hillsleigh we first met the man whose baneful influence destroyed that poor child's life; and O, Mr. Hossack, I blame myself for this business. If it had not been for my folly, he could never have possessed himself of Janet's mind as he did. I saw the evil when it was too late to undo what I had done.'

'Pray go on,' said Geoffrey eagerly; 'I want to know who and what that man was.'

'A mystery,' answered Lady Baker. 'And unhappily it was the mystery which surrounded him that made him most attractive to a romantic girl. Please let me tell the story my own way. How well I remember that June afternoon, the soft warm air, the birds singing in the old churchyard! We wandered about among the tombstones for a little while, reading the epitaphs, and, I am afraid, sometimes laughing at them, until all at once Janet caught

hold of my arm and cried "Hark!" her face lighted up with rapture. Through the open windows of the church there came such a burst of melody, the opening of the *Agnus Dei* in Mozart's Twelfth, played by a master-hand. "O," whispered Janet, with a gasp of delight, "isn't that lovely?"

'It was that scoundrel!' cried Geoffrey.

"I told you the Hillsleigh organ was worth hearing," said I. "Yes," said Janet, "but you did not tell me that the organist was one of the finest players in England. I'm sure that man must be." "Why, my dear," said I, "when I was last here the man played the usual droning voluntaries. This must be a new organist. Let's go in and see him." "No," said Janet, stopping me, "let us stay here till he has done playing. He may leave off if we go in." So we sat down upon one of the crumbling old tombstones and listened to our hearts' content. The man played through a great part of the Mass, and then strayed off into something else; wild strange music, which might or might not be sacred, but which sounded to me like a musical version of the great Pandemonium scene in *Paradise Lost*. Altogether this lasted nearly an hour, and then we heard the church door open and saw the player come out.'

'Pray describe him.'

‘He was tall and thin. I should think about five-and-thirty, with a face that was at once handsome and peculiar; a narrow oval face with a low forehead, an aquiline nose, a complexion pale to sallowness—like ivory that has yellowed with age—and the blackest eyes I ever saw.’

‘And black hair that grew downward into a peak in the centre of the forehead,’ cried Geoffrey breathlessly.

‘What, you know him, then?’ exclaimed Lady Baker.

‘I believe I met with him in the backwoods of America; your description both of the man and of his style of music precisely fits the man I am thinking of. That peculiarity about the form of the hair upon the forehead seems too much for a coincidence. I wonder what became of that man?’ he added, thinking aloud.

‘Let me finish my story, and then I will show you Mr. Vandeleur’s photograph,’ said Lady Baker.

‘You have a photograph of him?’ cried Geoffrey; ‘how lucky!’

‘Yes; and my possession of that portrait arises from the merest accident. I had a couple of photographers about the place at the time of Mr. Vandeleur’s visits, photographing the gardens and ferneries for

me, and one afternoon I took it into my head to have my guests photographed. We had been drinking tea in the river-garden, and I sent for the men and told them to arrange us in a group for a photograph. They pulled us about and moved and fidgeted us till we were all half worn out; but they ultimately produced half-a-dozen very fair groups, in a modern Watteau style, and Janet and Mr. Vandeleur are striking figures in all the groups. But this is anticipating events. I'll show you the photos by and by.'

'I await your ladyship's pleasure,' said Geoffrey, 'and am calm as a statue of Patience; but I would bet even money that this Vandeleur is the self-same scoundrel Lucius Davoren and I fell in with in America.'

'Extraordinary coincidences hardly surprise me. My life has been made up of them,' said Lady Baker. 'Well, Mr. Hossack, enchanted with his playing, I was foolish enough to introduce myself to this stranger, whom I found a man of the world, and, as I believed, a gentleman. He was on a walking tour through the south-west of England, he told us, and having heard of the Hillsleigh church and the Hillsleigh organ, had come out of his way to spend a day or two in the quiet village to which the church belongs. His manners were conciliating and agreeable. I

asked him to breakfast at Mardenholme on the following day, promising to show him my gardens and to let him hear some fine music. He came, heard Janet play and sing after breakfast, and, at my request, stayed all day. I daresay you would think me a very foolish woman if I were to attempt to describe the influence this man soon began to exercise over me. I knew nothing of him except what he chose to tell, and that was rather hinted than told. But he contrived to make me believe that he was the son of a man of position and of large wealth ; that his passion for music, and his somewhat Bohemian tendencies, had made a breach between him and his father ; and that he was determined to live in freedom and independence upon a small income which he had inherited from his mother rather than sacrifice his inclinations to the prejudices of a tyrannical old man who wanted his son to make a figure in the House of Commons.'

'You made no attempt to discover who and what the man really was?'

'No. It seemed painful to him to speak of his father ; and I respected his reserve. At the risk of being thought very foolish, I must confess that I was fascinated by the air of romance, and even mystery, which surrounded him ; perhaps also somewhat fasci-

nated by the man himself, whose very eccentricities were attractive. He was so different from other people; followed in no way the conventional model by which most men shape themselves; took so little trouble to make himself agreeable. Again, he entered my house only as a passing stranger. His genius, and not the importance and respectability of his connections, gave him the right of admission to my circle. If I tried to lure a butterfly into my drawing-room for the sake of its brilliant colouring, I should hardly trouble myself about the butterfly's parentage or antecedents. So with Mr. Vandeleur. I accepted him for what he was—an amateur musician of exceptional powers. I daresay, if he had been a professional artist, I should have taken more pains to find out who he was.'

'I daresay,' retorted Geoffrey bitterly, 'if he had confessed to getting his living by his talents, you would have been doubtful as to the safety of your plate. But a fine gentleman, strolling through the country for his own pleasure, is a different order of being.'

'Mr. Hossack, I fear you are a democrat! That dreadful Oxford is the cradle of advanced opinions. However,' continued Lady Baker, 'Mr. Vandeleur took up his quarters at our village inn, and spent the



greater part of his time in this house. I take some credit to myself, being by nature sadly impulsive, for not having asked him to stay here altogether. For my own part, I had no doubt as to his respectability. Vandeleur was a good name. True, it might be assumed; but then the man himself had a superior air. I thought I could not be mistaken. Mardenholme filled with visitors soon after Mr. Vandeleur's appearance among us. Every one seemed to like him. His genius astounded and charmed the women. The men liked his conversation, and admired, and even envied, him for his billiard playing, which I believe was *hors ligne*. "The time I have not given to music I have given to billiards," he said when some one wondered at his skill. This must have been exaggeration, however, for he had read enormously, and could talk upon every possible subject.'

'Yes,' said Geoffrey thoughtfully, 'the description tallies in every detail—allowing for the difference between a man in the centre of civilisation, and the same man run wild and savaged by semi-starvation. I know this Vandeleur.'

'You know where he is, and what he is doing?' asked Lady Baker eagerly.

'No. At a random guess I should think it probable that his skeleton is peacefully mouldering



under the pine-trees somewhere between the Athabasca and the Pacific—unless he was as lucky as my party in falling across better furnished travellers.’

Geoffrey had entertained her ladyship with a slight sketch of his American adventures during luncheon, so she understood this allusion.

‘You must tell me all about your meeting with him by and by,’ she said. ‘I have very little more to say. Those two, Janet and Mr. Vandeleur, were brought very much together by their common genius. He accompanied her songs, taught her new forms of expression, showed her the mechanics of her art; and her improvement under this tuition, even in a little less than three weeks, was marvellous. They sang together, played concertante duets for violin and piano, and sometimes spent hours together alone in this room, preparing some new surprise for the evening. You will say that I ought to have considered the danger of such companionship for a romantic inexperienced girl. I should have done so, perhaps, had I not believed in this Mr. Vandeleur, and had there not been lurking in my mind a dim idea that a marriage between him and Janet would be the most natural thing in the world. True, that according to his own showing his resources were small in the present; yet there could be no doubt, I

thought, that he would ultimately be reconciled to his father, and restored to his proper position. But remember, Mr. Hossack, this was only a vague notion, an idea of something that might happen in the remote future, when we should have become a great deal better acquainted with Mr. Vandeleur and his surroundings. Of present danger I had not a thought.'

'Strange blindness,' said Geoffrey. 'But then Fortune is blind, and in this instance you were Fortune.'

'Bear in mind,' replied Lady Baker, 'that this man was full fifteen years Janet's senior, that she was immensely admired by men who were younger, and, in the ordinary sense of the word, far more attractive. Why should I think this man would exercise so fatal an influence over her? But towards the end of her visit my eyes were opened. I came into this room one morning and found Janet in tears by yonder piano, while Mr. Vandeleur bent over her, speaking in a low earnest voice. Both started guiltily at sight of me. This, and numerous other trifling indications, told me that there was mischief at work; and when Mr. Davoren wrote to me a few days afterwards, urging his daughter's return, I was only too glad to let her go, believing that the end of her visit would be the end of all danger.'

When she was gone, I considered it my duty, as her friend, to ascertain the real state of the case. I told Mr. Vandeleur my suspicions, and assured him of my sympathy and my interest if he were, as I believed, anxious to win Janet for his wife. But to my utter astonishment and indignation he repudiated the idea; declared his profound esteem and admiration for Miss Davoren, and talked of "fettters"—the nature of which he did not condescend to explain. "Yet I found you talking to that young lady in a manner which had moved her to tears," I said doubtfully. "My dear madam, I had been telling her the troubles of my youth," he answered with perfect self-possession, "and that gentle heart was moved to pity." "A gentle heart, indeed," I replied; "who would not hate the scoundrel who could wound it?" I was by no means satisfied with this conversation, and from that moment lowered my opinion of Mr. Vandeleur. He may have perceived the change in my feelings; in any case, he speedily announced his intention of travelling farther westward, thanked me for my friendly reception, and bade me good-bye. Only a few weeks after that I heard of Janet Davoren's disappearance. You can imagine, perhaps, what I suffered, blaming my own blindness, my foolish neglect, as the primary cause of her ruin.'

‘There is a fate in these things,’ said Geoffrey gloomily.

‘I called upon Mr. Davoren, hinted at my fears, and entreated him to be candid with me. But he evaded my questions with a proud reserve, which I could but admire, and kept the secret of his daughter’s disgrace, even though it was breaking his heart. Thus repulsed, what could I do? And the claims upon my time are so incessant. Life is such a whirligig, Mr. Hossack. If I had had more leisure for thinking, I should have been perfectly miserable about that poor girl.’

‘You never obtained any clue to her fate?’

‘No. Yet at one moment the thread seemed almost in my hand, had I been but in time to follow it. Three years after that fatal summer, a cousin of Sir Horatio’s, a young lieutenant in the navy, who had been with us at the time of Miss Davoren’s visit, came here for the shooting. “What do you think, Lady Baker?” he drawled out at dinner the first day in his stupid haw-haw manner, “I met that fellow Vandeleur last Christmas, at Milford, in Dorsetshire. I was down there to look up my old uncle Timberly—you remember old Timberly, Sir Horatio, the man from whom I’m supposed to have expectations; revolting old fellow, who has gout in his stomach twice

a year and never seems any the worse for it. Well, Lady Baker, I found a fellow I knew down at Milford, an ensign in the regiment quartered there, and he was dooced civil, and asked me to dine with him on their guest night, and there, large as life, I beheld our friend Vandeleur. He seemed uncommonly popular in the mess, but he wasn't overpleased to see me; and my friend Lucas told me afterwards that in his opinion the man was no better than an adventurer, and the colonel was a fool to encourage him. He was always winning everybody's money, and never seemed to lose any of his own; altogether there was something queer about him. There was an uncommonly pretty woman with him—his wife, I suppose—but she never went anywhere, or visited anybody, and she looked very unhappy, Lucas told me. I came back to London next day, and I had a letter from Lucas a week afterwards to say that there'd been an awful burst-up at Milford; that Vandeleur had been caught in the act of cheating at whist—the stakes high, and so on—and had been morally, if not physically, kicked out of the mess-room; after which he had bolted, leaving the poor little wife and no end of debts behind him.”

‘ Did you act upon this information, Lady Baker?’  
asked Geoffrey.

‘I went to Milford next day, and with some difficulty found the house in which the Vandeleurs had lodged; but Mrs. Vandeleur had left the town within the last few weeks with her little girl, and no one could tell me what had become of her. She was very good, very honourable, very unhappy, the landlady told me; had lived in the humblest way, and supported herself by teaching music after her husband left her. I made the woman describe her to me, and the description exactly fitted Janet.’

‘You have not heard a Mrs. Bertram, a singer who appeared at a good many concerts in London last winter?’

‘No. I spent last winter in Paris. Do you mean to tell me that this Mrs. Bertram is Janet Davoren under an assumed name?’

‘I hardly feel myself at liberty to tell you even as much as that without permission from the lady herself. But since you have been so very good to me, Lady Baker, I cannot be churlish enough to affect secrecy in anything that concerns myself alone. You have guessed rightly. I am attached to this lady, and my dearest hope is that I may win her for my wife; but to do this I must discover the fate of her infamous husband, since she refuses to repudiate a tie which I have strong reason to believe is illegal.



And now, Lady Baker, pray show me those photographs, and let me see if the man who ruined Janet Davoren's bright young life is really the man I met in the American backwoods.'

'Come to my room,' said Lady Baker, 'and you shall see them.'

She led the way to a charming apartment on the upper story, and at one end of the house, spacious, luxurious, with windows commanding every angle of view—bow-windows overhanging the river on one side, an oriel commanding the distant hills on another, long French windows opening upon a broad balcony on the third. Here were scattered those periodicals with which Lady Baker fortified her mind, and supplied herself with the latest varieties in opinion; here were divers davenports and writing-tables at which Lady Baker penned those delightful epistles which were doubtless destined to form part of the light literature of the next generation, printed on thickest paper, and sumptuously bound, and adorned with portraits of her ladyship after different painters, and at various stages of her distinguished career.

Here, on a massive stand, were numerous portfolios of photographs, one of which was labelled 'Personal Friends.'



‘You will find the groups in that, Mr. Hossack,’ she said, and looked over Geoffrey’s shoulder while he went slowly through the photographs.

They came presently to a garden scene, a group of young men and women against a background of sunlit lawn and river; light rustic chairs scattered about, a framework of summer foliage, a tea table on one side, a Blenheim spaniel and a Maltese terrier in the foreground.

Janet’s tall figure and noble face appeared conspicuously among figures less perfect, faces more commonplace, and by her side stood the man whom Geoffrey Hossack had seen in the flesh, wild, unkempt, haggard, famished, savage, amidst the awful solitude of the pine-forest.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘that is the man.’

## CHAPTER IV.

### LUCIUS MAKES A CONFESSION.

It was nearly six o'clock when Geoffrey and his cousins left Mardenholme. On descending from Lady Baker's apartments in quest of Belle and Jessie, Mr. Hossack had found those two damsels wandering among the shrubberies in the forlornest manner, vainly striving to stifle frequent yawns, so unenterprising had been the society of the devoted Mr. and Mrs. Wimple, 'who scarcely did anything but whisper and titter to each other all the time we were with them,' Belle said afterwards.

'I thought you were playing croquet,' said Geoffrey, when he found this straggling party in a grove of arbutus and magnolia.

'We *have* been playing croquet,' answered Jessie, with some asperity; 'but one can't play croquet for ever. There's nothing in Dante's infernal regions more dreadful than that would be. We played as

long as we could ; Mr. and Mrs. Wimple were tired ever so long before we finished.'

'No, indeed,' exclaimed the Wimples simultaneously.

'What have you been doing all this time, Geoffrey?' asked Belle.

'Lady Baker has been so kind as to show me her pictures.'

'Yes, of course ; but you needn't have been hours looking at them. We must get back directly, or we shall be late for dinner. Ah, there is Lady Baker,' cried Belle, as her ladyship appeared on the terrace before the drawing-room windows. 'Come and say good-bye, Jessie, and get the boat ready, Geof. You'll have to row us back in an hour. Nothing vexes papa so much as any one being late for dinner. I don't think he would wait more than ten minutes for an archbishop.'

'I'll row like old boots,' answered Geoffrey ; whereupon the young ladies ran off to take an affectionate leave of Lady Baker, while their cousin sauntered down to the weeping willow to whose lowest branch he had moored the wherry. In five minutes they had embarked, and the oars were dipping in the smooth water.

They were at Hillersdon in time to dress, some-

what hurriedly, for the all-important eight-o'clock dinner, which went off pleasantly enough. All that evening cousin Geoffrey made himself particularly agreeable—listened to Belle's breakneck fantasias and Jessie's newest ballads with every appearance of rapture; played chess with Belle, and *béziq*ue with Jessie, and allowed himself to be beaten by both.

'What a delightful evening we have had!' said Belle, as she wished him good-night. 'Why don't you come to us oftener, Geoffrey?'

'I mean to come very often in future,' replied the impostor, hardly knowing what he said.

At breakfast next morning there was no sign of Geoffrey; but just as Belle had seated herself before the urn, the butler appeared with a letter.

'Mr. Geoffrey left this for you, ma'am,' said the domestic, 'when he went away.'

'Went away! My cousin, Mr. Hossack, gone!' cried Belle, aghast, while Jessie rushed to her sister's side, and strove to possess herself of the letter.

'Yes, ma'am. Mr. Geoffrey left by the first train; Dawson drove him over in the dog-cart. The letter would explain, Mr. Geoffrey said.'

'Belle, read the letter, for goodness' sake!' cried Jessie impatiently; 'and don't sit staring like a figure in a hairdresser's window.'

The butler lingered to give a finishing touch to the well-furnished sideboard, and to hear the contents of Geoffrey's letter.

It was brief, and, in the opinion of the sisters, unsatisfactory—the style spasmodic, as of one accustomed to communicate his ideas by electric telegraph, rather than in the more ornate form of a letter.

‘Dearest Belle,—Most unfortunate. Have received telegram summoning me to town. Most particular business. Must go. Regret much. Thought I was in for no end of fun down here. Hope to return shortly. Make my excuses to my uncle, and be lenient yourself towards your affectionate cousin

‘GEOFF.’

‘Was there ever anything so annoying?’ cried Belle, ‘and after Lady Baker’s politeness to him yesterday! Particular business! What can he have to do with business?’

‘I daresay it’s horse-racing or something dreadful,’ said Jessie. ‘I saw a great change in him. He has such a wild look sometimes, and hardly ever seems to know what one says to him.’

‘Jessie,’ exclaimed Belle with solemnity, ‘I shouldn’t be surprised if Geoffrey were going to be married.’

‘O, Belle,’ cried Jessie with a gasp, ‘you don’t think he’d be mean enough for that—to go and get engaged, and never say a word to us.’

‘I don’t know,’ answered her sister gloomily. ‘Men are capable of any amount of meanness in that way.’

Geoffrey Hossack went up to London as fast as the South-Western Railway would take him thither, and straightway upon his arrival transferred himself to a hansom, bidding the driver convey him at full speed to the Shadrack-road.

He reached that melancholy district before noon, and found the shabby-genteel villa, with its fast-decaying stucco front, its rusty iron railings, in which his friend Lucius Davoren had begun his professional career. But, early as it was, Lucius had gone forth more than two hours.

‘I must see him,’ said Geoffrey to the feeble little charwoman, whose spirits were fluttered by the appearance of this rampant stranger, his fiery impatience visible in his aspect. ‘Have you any idea where I can find him?’

‘Lor, no, sir; he goes from place to place—in and out, and up and down. It wouldn’t be the least bit of good tryin’ to foller him. You might wait if you liked, on the chanc’t. He do sometimes come

home betwixt one and two to take a mossel of bread-and-cheese and a glass of ale, if he's going to make a extry long afternoon. But his general way is to come home to a tea-dinner betwixt five and six.'

'I'll wait till two,' said Geoffrey, 'and if he's not home by that time, I'll leave a letter for him.'

So Mr. Hossack dismissed the cab, and went into his friend's small parlour—such a dreary sitting-room as it seemed to eyes accustomed only to brightness: furniture so sordid; walls so narrow; ceiling darkened by the smoke of gas that had burned late into the long winter nights. Geoffrey looked round with a shudder.

'And Lucius really lives here,' he said to himself, 'and is contented to work on, happy in the idea that he is a benefactor to his species—watching the measles of infancy, administering to the asthmas of old age. Thank God there are such men in the world,—and thank God I am not one of them!'

He looked round the room in quest of that refuge of shallow minds, the day's paper; but newspaper there was none—only that poor little collection of books on the rickety chiffonier: well-thumbed volumes, wherewith Lucius had so often solaced his loneliness.

'Shakespeare, Euripides, Montaigne, *Tristram*



*Shandy*,' muttered Geoffrey, running over the titles contemptuously. 'Musty old buffers! Come out, old Shandy. I suppose you're about the liveliest of the lot.'

He tried to settle himself on the feeble old sofa, too short and too narrow for muscular young Oxford; stretched his legs this way and that; read a few pages; smiled at a line here and there; yawned a good deal, and then threw the book aside with an exclamation of impatience. Those exuberant energies asked not repose; he wanted to be up and doing. His mind was full of his interview with Lady Baker, full of anxious longing thoughts about the woman he loved.

'What became of that man we met in the forest?' he asked of the unresponsive atmosphere. 'If I could but track him to his miserable grave, and get a certificate of his death, what a happy fellow I should be.'

He paced the little room, looked out of the window at the enlivening traffic of the Shadrack-road; huge wagons laden with petroleum casks, timber, iron, cotton bales, grinding slowly along the macadam; an organ droning drearily on the other side of the way; a costermonger crying whelks and hot eels, as appropriate refreshment in the sultry August noontide; upon everything that faded, burnt-up as-

pect which pervades London at the end of summer ; a universal staleness, an odour of doubtful fish and rotten fruit.

After the space of an hour and a half, which to Geoffrey's weariness had seemed interminable, a light step sounded on the little stone-paved approach ; a latchkey clicked in the door, and Lucius came into the parlour.

There was surprise unbounded on the surgeon's side.

'Why, Geoff, I thought you were in Norway!' he exclaimed.

'I changed my mind about Norway,' answered the other somewhat sheepishly. 'How could I be such a selfish scoundrel as to go and enjoy myself shooting and fishing and so on, while she is lonely? No, Lucius, I feel somehow that it is my destiny to win her, and that it will be my own fault—*de mon tort*, as the lawyers say—if I lose my chance. So when I got as far as Hull I turned tail, and came back to town, where I found a letter from my cousin Belle Hossack offering me the very opportunity I wanted.'

'Your cousin Belle! the very opportunity! What do you mean? What could your cousin Belle have to do with my sister?'

‘An introduction to Lady Baker. Don’t you see, Lucius? From Lady Baker I might find out all about that villain who called himself Vandeleur. Now, for heaven’s sake, old fellow, be calm and hear what I have to tell you. I’ve travelled up from Hampshire post haste on purpose to tell you all by word of mouth. I might have written, but I wanted to talk the matter over with you. You may be able to throw some light upon this business.’

‘Upon what business?’ asked Lucius, mystified by this hurried and disjointed address.

‘You may be able to tell me what became of that wild fellow who came in upon us in our log-hut out yonder—whether he is alive or dead. Why, good heavens, Lucius, you’ve turned as white as a sheet of paper! What’s the matter?’

‘I’m tired,’ said the surgeon, dropping slowly into a chair by the table, and shading his face with his hand. ‘And your wild talk is enough to bewilder any man; especially one who has just come in from a harassing round amongst sickness and poverty. What do you mean? You speak one minute of my sister and Lady Baker, and in the next of that man we met yonder. What link can there be between subjects so wide apart?’

‘A closer link than you could ever guess. The

villain who married your sister and that man yonder—'

'Were one and the same!' cried Lucius, almost with a shriek. 'I suspected it; I suspected it out yonder in the forest, as I sat and watched that man's face in the firelight. I have suspected it since then many a time; have dreamt it oftener than I can count; for half my dreams are haunted by the hateful shadow of that man. Was I right? For God's sake speak out, Geoffrey. Is that the man?'

'It is.'

'You know it?'

'I have had indisputable proof of it. Lady Baker showed me a photograph of the man who stole your sister from her home, and the face in that photograph is the face of the man we let into our hut in the backwoods.'

'Mysterious are Thy ways,' cried Lucius, 'and Thy paths past finding out. Many a time have I fought against this idea. It seemed of all things the most improbable; too wild, too strange for belief. I dared not allow myself to think it. It was he, then. My hatred of him was a natural instinct; my abhorrence hardly needed the proof of his infamy. From the first moment in which our eyes met my soul cried aloud, "There is thy natural enemy."''

‘It is your turn to talk wildly now, Lucius,’ said Geoffrey, surprised by the other’s passion, ‘but you have not answered my question. While I lay delirious in the log-hut, not knowing anything that was going on round me, did nothing happen to throw a light upon the fate of the guide and that man Matchi, as we called him? They set out to try and find the track; did they never return?’

‘The guide never returned,’ answered Lucius, looking downward with a gloomy countenance, in deep thought. ‘Now, I’ll ask you a question, Geoffrey. In all your talk with our German friend, Schanck, while *I* was ill and unconscious, did he tell you nothing, hint nothing, about that man?’

‘Nothing,’ replied the other unhesitatingly. ‘He was as close as the ‘grave. But had he anything to tell?’

‘Yes, if he had chosen to betray. He might have told you that I, your friend—I, who had watched by your bed through those long dreary nights, Death staring me in the face as I watched—that I, whom you would have trusted in the direst extremity—was an assassin.’

‘Lucius,’ cried Geoffrey, starting up with a look of horror, ‘are you mad?’

‘No, Geoff. I am reasonable enough now,

Heaven knows ; whatever I might have been in that fatal time yonder. You want the truth, and you shall have it, though it will sicken you as it sickens me to think of it. I have kept the hideous secret from you ; not because I had any fear of the consequences of my act—not because that I am not ready to defend the deed boldly before my fellow men—but because I thought the horrid story might part us. We have been fast friends for so many years, Geoff, and I could not bear to think your liking might be turned to loathing.'

Tears, the agonising drops which intensest pain wrings from manhood, were in his eyes. He covered his face with his clasped hands ; as if he would have shut out the very light which had witnessed that horror he shuddered to recall.

'Lucius,' exclaimed Geoffrey, at once anxious and bewildered, 'all this is madness ! You have been overworking your brain.'

'Let me tell my story,' said the other. 'It will lighten my burden to share it—even if the revelation makes you hate me.'

'Even on your own showing I would not believe you guilty of any baseness,' answered Geoffrey. 'I would sooner think your mind distraught than that I had been mistaken in your character.'



‘It was no deliberate baseness,’ said Lucius quietly. He had in some measure recovered his composure since that burst of passionate grief. ‘I did what at the moment appeared to me only an act of justice. I took a life for a life.’

‘You, Lucius!’ cried the other, his eyes opening wide with horror. ‘You took the life of a man—yonder—in America?’

‘Yes, Geoffrey. I killed the man who blighted my sister’s life.’

‘Good God! He is dead then—this scoundrel—and by your hand.’

‘He is. And if ever man deserved to die by the act of his fellow man that man most fully merited his fate. But though in that awful hour, when the deed of horror which I had discovered was burnt into my brain, I took his life deliberately and advisedly, the memory of the act has been a torment to me ever since. But let me tell you the secret of that miserable time. It is not a long story, and I will tell it in as few words as possible.’

Briefly, but with an unflinching truthfulness, he told of the night scene in the forest; the ruffian’s attempt to enter the hut; and the bullet which struck him down as he burst open the window.

‘You lay there, Geoffrey, unconscious; sleeping



that blessed sleep which Gods sends to those whose feet have trodden the border-land betwixt life and death. Even to awaken you roughly might have been to peril your chance of recovery. The firing of the gun might have done it. But my first thought was that he, the assassin and traitor who had slaughtered the faithful companion of our dangers and privation—that he, brutal and merciless as any savage in the worst island of the Pacific—should not be suffered to approach you in your helplessness. I had warned him that if he attempted to cross our threshold I would shoot him down with as little compunction as if he had been a mad dog. I kept my word.’

‘But are you certain your bullet was fatal?’

‘Of what followed the firing of that shot I know nothing; but I have never doubted its result. Even if the wound were not immediately fatal the man must have speedily perished. The last I saw was the loosening clutch of his lean hand as he dropped from the window; the last I heard was a howl of pain. My brain, which had been kept on the rack for many a dreary night of sleeplessness and fear, gave way all at once, and I fell to the ground like a log. I have every reason to believe that what I suffered at that moment was an apoplectic seizure, which might have been fatal, but for Schanck’s promptitude in bleeding

me. After the shock came brain fever, from which, as you know, I was slow to recover. When my senses did return, I seemed to enter upon a new world. Thought and memory came back by degrees, and the vision of that scene in the forest shaped itself slowly out of the confusion of my brain until it became the vivid picture which has haunted me ever since.'

'Had you met the man who betrayed your sister, would you have killed him?' asked Geoffrey.

'In fair fight, yes.'

'He who rules the destinies of us all decreed that you should meet him unawares. You were the instrument of God's vengeance upon a villain.'

'"Vengeance is mine,"' repeated Lucius thoughtfully. 'Often, when reproaching myself for that rash act, I have almost deemed the deed a kind of blasphemy. What right had *I* to forestall God's day of reckoning? For every crime there is an appointed punishment. The assassin we hang to-day might pay a still heavier price for his sin were we to leave him in the hands of God, or might be permitted to repent and atone.'

'Lucius,' said Geoffrey, stretching out his hand to his friend, 'in my eyes you stand clear of all guilt. Was it not chiefly for my defence you fired that shot? and for my own part I can assure you that cold-blooded

scoundrel would have had a short shrift had I been his executioner. So let us dismiss all thought of him, with the memory of the last murderer who swung at Newgate. One fact remains paramount—a fact that for me changes earth to Paradise; your sister is free.'

Lucius started, and for the first time a look of absolute fear came into his face.

'What!' he exclaimed. 'You will tell her that her husband fell by my hand? You forget, Geoffrey, that my confession must be sacred. If I did not pledge you to secrecy, it was because I had so firm a faith in your honour that I needed no promise of your silence.'

'Let me tell her only of that man's death.'

'She will hardly be satisfied with a statement unsupported by proof,' answered Lucius doubtfully.

'What, will she doubt my honour?'

'Love is apt to be desperate. The lover has a code of his own.'

'Not if he is an honest man,' cried Geoffrey.

'But Janet has been once deceived, and will be slow to trust where she loves. Put her to the test. Tell her that you know this man is dead, and if she will believe you and if she will be your wife, there is no one, not even yourself, who will be gladder than I. God knows it is a grief for me to think of her lonely

position, her life-long penance for the error of her youth. I have entreated her to share my home, humble as it is, but she refuses. She is proud of her independence, and though I know she loves me, she prefers to live aloof from me, with no other society than her child's.'

They talked long, Geoffrey full of mingled hope and fear. He left his friend late in the afternoon, intending to go down to Stillmington by the mail train, to try his fortunes once more. Lucius had told him he was beloved; was not that sufficient ground for hope?

'She will not be too exacting,' he said to himself. 'She will not ask me for chapter and verse, for the doctor's certificate, the undertaker's bill. If I say to her, "Upon my honour your husband is dead," she will surely believe me.'

## Book the Third.

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### CHAPTER I.

A CHANGE CAME O'ER THE SPIRIT OF MY DREAM.

THAT calm delight which Lucius Davoren had hitherto felt in the society of his betrothed, and his happy expectation of a prosperous future to be shared with her, were now clouded over with new doubts and fears. His mind had been weighed down by the burden of a dreadful secret, from the moment of that discovery which had showed him that the man he had killed and the father of the girl who loved him were one and the same. Those calm clear eyes which looked at him so tenderly sometimes wounded him as keenly as the bitterest reproach. Had she but known the fatal truth—she who had always set the memory of her father above her affection for himself—could he doubt the result of that knowledge? Could he doubt that she would have turned from him with abhorrence,

that she would have shrunk with loathing from the lightest touch of his blood-stained hand?

Vain would have been all argument, all attempt to justify his act, with the daughter who clung with a romantic fondness to her lost father's image.

'You killed him.' She would have summed up all arguments in those three words. 'You killed him. If he was wicked, you gave him no time for repentance; you cut him off in the midst of his sin. Who made you his judge: who made you his executioner? He was a sinner like yourself, and you thrust yourself between God and His infinite mercy. You did more than slay his body; you robbed him of redemption for his sin.'

He could imagine that this girl, clinging with unreasonable love to that dead sinner's memory, would argue somewhat in this wise; and he felt himself powerless to reply. These thoughts weighed him down, and haunted him even in the company of his beloved. Yet, strange to say, Lucille did not remark the difference in her lover, and it remained for Lucius to perceive a change in her. His own preoccupation had rendered him less observant than usual, and he was slow to mark this alteration in Lucille's manner, but the time came when he awakened to the fact. There was a change, indefinable, indescribable, but a

change which he felt vaguely, and which seemed to grow stronger day by day. The thought filled him with a sudden horror. Did she suspect? Had some circumstance, unnoticed by him, led the way to the discovery he most dreaded, to the revelation of that secret he hoped to hide from her for ever? Surely no. Her hand did not shrink from his, the kiss he pressed upon that pure young brow evoked no shudder. Whatever the trouble was that had wrought this change in her, paled the fair cheek and saddened the sweet eyes, the perplexity or the sorrow was in herself, and had no reference to him.

‘Lucille,’ he said one evening, a few days after his interview with Geoffrey Hossack, as they paced the garden together in the dusk, ‘it seems to me that we are not quite so happy as we used to be. We do not talk so hopefully of the future; we have not such pleasant thoughts and fancies as we once had. Very often when I am speaking to you, I see your eyes fixed with a strange far-off look; as if you were thinking of something quite remote from the subject of our talk. Is there anything that troubles you, dear? Are you uneasy about your grandfather?’

‘He does not seem so well as he did three weeks ago. He does not care about coming down-stairs now; the old weakness seems to have returned. And his



appetite has fallen off again. I wish you would be a little more candid, Lucius,' she said, looking at him earnestly. 'You used to say he was improving steadily, and that you had great hopes of making him quite himself again before very long; now you hardly say anything, except to give me directions about diet.'

'Do you wish me to speak quite plainly, Lucille,' asked Lucius seriously; 'even if what I have to say should increase your anxiety?'

'Yes, yes; pray treat me like a woman, and not like a child. Remember what my life has been—how full of care and sorrow. I am not like a girl who has lived only in the sunshine. Tell me the plain truth, Lucius, however painful. You think my grandfather worse?'

'I do, Lucille, very much worse than I thought him three weeks ago. And what is more, I am obliged to confess myself puzzled by his present condition. I can find no cause for this backward progress, and yet I am watching the symptoms very closely. I have this case so deeply at heart, that I do not believe any one could do more with it than I. But if I do not see an improvement before many days are over, I shall seek advice from wider experience than my own. I will bring one of the greatest

men in London to see your grandfather. A consultation may be unnecessary or useless, but it will be for our mutual satisfaction.'

'Yes,' answered Lucille, 'I have the strongest faith in your skill; but, as you say, it might be better to have farther advice. Poor grandpapa! It makes me wretched to see him suffer—to see him so weak and weary and restless, if not in absolute pain, and to be able to do so little for him.'

'You do all that love and watchfulness can do, dearest. By the way, you spoke of diet just now. That is a thing about which you cannot be too careful. We have to restore exhausted nature, to renovate a constitution almost worn out by hard usage. I should like to know all about the preparation of the broths and jellies you give your grandfather. Are they made by you, or by Mrs. Wincher?'

'Wincher makes the broth and beef-tea in an earthenware jar in the oven; I make the jellies with my own hands.'

'Are you quite sure of Wincher's cleanliness and care?'

'Quite. I see her getting the jar ready every morning when I am in the kitchen attending to other little things. I am not afraid of working in the kitchen, you know, Lucius.'

'I know that you are the most domestic and skilful among women, and that you will make a model wife, darling,' he answered tenderly.

'For a poor man, perhaps,' she answered, with the smile that had been rare of late, 'not for a rich one. I should not know how to spend money, or to give dinner-parties, or to dress fashionably.'

'That kind of knowledge would come with the occasion. When I am a famous doctor you shall be a lady of fashion. But to return to the diet question. You are assured that there is perfect cleanliness in the preparation of your grandfather's food—no neglected copper saucepans used, for instance?'

'There is not such a thing as a copper saucepan in the house. What made you ask the question?'

'Mr. Sivewright has complained lately of occasional attacks of nausea, and I am unable to account for the symptom. That is what makes me anxious about the preparation of his food.'

'Would it be any satisfaction to you if I were to prepare everything myself?'

'A very great satisfaction.'

'Then I will do it, Lucius. Wincher may feel a little offended, but I will try and reconcile her to my interference. It was a great privilege to be allowed to make the jellies.'

‘Never mind if she is vexed, darling; a few sweet words from you will soon smooth her ruffled feathers. I shall be glad to know that you prepare everything for the invalid. And I would not do it in the kitchen, where Wincher might interfere. Have a fire in the little dressing-room next your grandfather’s room, and have your saucepans and beef-tea and so on up there. By that means you will be able to give him what he wants at any moment, without delay.’

‘I will do so, Lucius. But I fear you think my grandfather in danger.’

‘Not exactly in danger, darling. But he is very ill, and I have been thinking it might be better for you to have a nurse. I don’t say that he requires any one to sit up at night with him. He is not ill enough for that. I am only afraid that the care he requires may be too much for you.’

‘It is not too much for me, Lucius,’ answered the girl eagerly. ‘I would not have a stranger about him for worlds. The sight of a sick-nurse would kill him.’

‘That is a foolish prejudice, Lucille.’

‘It may be; and when you find I nurse him badly, or neglect him, you may bring a stranger. Till then I claim the right to wait upon him, with Jacob Wincher’s assistance. He has been my grand-

father's valet—giving the little help his master would ever accept—for the last twenty years.'

'And you have perfect confidence in Jacob Wincher?'

'Confidence!' exclaimed Lucille, with a wondering look. 'I have known him all my life, and seen his devotion to my grandfather. What reason could I have to doubt him?'

'Little apparent reason, I admit,' answered Lucius thoughtfully. 'Yet it is sometimes from those we least suspect we suffer the deepest wrongs. These Winchers may believe your grandfather to be very rich; they may suppose that he has left them a good deal of money; and might—mind, I am only suggesting a remote contingency—they *might* desire to shorten his life. O, my dearest,' he cried, pained by Lucille's whitening face, 'remember I do not for a moment say that this is likely; but—as I told you a few moments ago—there are symptoms in the case that puzzle me, and we cannot be too careful.'

Lucille leaned upon him, trembling like a leaf, with her white face turned towards him, a look of unspeakable horror in her eyes.

'You don't mean—' she faltered; 'you cannot mean that you suspect, that you are afraid of my grandfather being poisoned?'

‘Lucille,’ he said tenderly, sustaining the almost-fainting girl, ‘the truth is always best. You shall know all I can tell you. There are diseases which baffle even experience; there are symptoms which may mean one thing or another, may indicate such and such a state, or be the effect of a condition exactly opposite; there are symptoms which may arise alike from natural causes or from a slow and subtle poison. This is why so many a victim has been done to death under the very eye of his medical attendant, and only when too late the hideous truth has dawned upon the doctor’s mind, and he has asked himself with bitter self-reproach, “Why did I not make this discovery sooner?”’

‘Whom could you suspect?’ cried Lucille. ‘I am confident as to the fidelity of Mr. and Mrs. Wincher. They have had it in their power to rob my grandfather at any moment, if gain could have tempted them to injure him. Why, after all these years of faithful servitude, should they attempt to murder him?’

This was said in a low tremulous voice, terror still holding possession of the girl’s distracted mind.

‘The thought is as horrible as it appears impossible,’ said Lucius, whose apprehensions had as yet assumed only the vaguest form. He had never

meant to betray this shadowy fear, which had arisen only within the last twenty-four hours; but he had been led on to say more than he intended.

‘Let us speak no more of it, dearest,’ he said soothingly. ‘You attach too much importance to my words. I have only suggested care; I have only told you a well-known fact, namely, that the symptoms of slow poisoning and of natural disease are sometimes exactly alike.’

‘You have filled me with fear and horror!’ cried Lucille, shuddering.

‘Let me bring a nurse into the house,’ pleaded Lucius, angry with himself for his imprudence. ‘Her presence would at least give you courage and confidence.’

‘No; I will not have my grandfather frightened to death. He shall take nothing but what I prepare for him; no one shall go near him but I, or without my being present.’

‘By the way,’ said Lucius thoughtfully, ‘you remember that noise I heard the evening we went up to the loft together?’

‘I remember your fancy about a noise,’ Lucille answered carelessly.

‘My fancy, then, if you like. I suppose nothing



has ever happened since to throw a light upon that fancy of mine?’

‘ Nothing.’

‘ You are quite sure that no stranger could obtain admission to those up-stairs rooms, or to any part of this house?’

‘ Quite sure.’

‘ In that case we may rest assured that all is safe, and you need think no more of anything I have said.’

He tried with every art he knew to soothe away the fears which his imprudent words had occasioned, but could not altogether succeed in tranquillising her, though he brought the Amati violin into requisition, and played some of his sweetest symphonies—melodies which, to quote Mrs. Wincher, ‘ might have drawn tears out of a deal board.’

Nothing could dispel the cloud which he had raised; and he left Cedar House full of trouble and self-reproach, beyond measure angry with himself for his folly.

## CHAPTER II.

### LUCIUS IS PUZZLED.

WHEN Lucius made his early visit—now always the first duty of every day—to Cedar House on the following morning, he found that Lucille had already acted upon his advice. The dressing-room—a slip of a room communicating with Mr. Sivewright's spacious chamber—had been furnished in a rough-and-ready manner with a chair and table, an old cabinet, brought down from the loft, to hold cups and glasses, medicine bottles, and other oddments; a little row of saucepans, neatly arranged in a cupboard by the small fireplace; and a narrow little iron bedstead in a corner of the room.

'I shall sleep here at night,' said Lucille, as Lucius surveyed her preparations, 'and if I keep that door ajar, I can hear every sound in the next room.'

'My darling, it will never do for you to be on the watch at night,' he answered anxiously. 'You will wear yourself out in a very short time. Anxiety by

day and wakefulness by night will soon tell their tale.'

'Let me have my own way, Lucius,' she pleaded. 'You say yourself that my grandfather wants no attendance at night. He told me only this morning that he sleeps pretty well, and rarely wakes till the morning. But it will be a satisfaction to me if I feel that I am close at hand, ready to wake at his call. I am a very light sleeper.'

'Was Mrs. Wincher angry at your taking the work out of her hands?'

'She seemed vexed, just at first; but I gave her a kiss, and talked her over. "You'll fag yourself to death, Miss Lucille," she said; "but do as you please. It'll leave me free for my cleaning." You know, Lucius, what a passion she has for muddling about with a pail and a scrubbing-brush, and turning out odd corners. The cleaning never seems to make any difference in the look of that huge kitchen; but if it pleases her one cannot complain. O, Lucius,' she went on, in an anxious whisper, 'I was awake all the night thinking of your dreadful words. I trust in God you may find my grandfather better this morning.'

'I hope so, dearest; but, believe me, you attach far too much importance to my foolish words last

night. If you can trust the Winchers there can be no possible ground for fear. What enemy could approach your grandfather here?’

‘Enemy!’ repeated Lucille, as if struck by the word. ‘What enemies could he have—a poor harmless old man?’

Lucius went into Mr. Sivewright’s room. He found his patient still suffering from that strange depression of spirits which had weighed him down lately; still complaining of the symptoms which had perplexed Lucius since his return from Stillmington.

‘There are strange noises in the house,’ said the old man querulously, when the usual questions had been asked and answered. ‘I heard them again last night—stealthy footsteps creeping along the passage—doors opening and shutting—cautious, muffled steps, that had a secret guilty sound.’

‘All movement in a house has that stealthy sound in the small hours,’ said Lucius, sorely perplexed himself, yet anxious to reassure his patient. ‘Your housekeeper or her husband may have been up later than usual, and may have crept quietly up to bed.’

‘I tell you this was in the middle of the night,’ answered Mr. Sivewright impatiently. ‘The Winchers are as methodical in their habits as the old clock in the hall. I asked Jacob this morning if he

had been astir after midnight, and he told me he had not.'

'The fact is, my dear sir, you are nervous,' said Lucius in a soothing tone. 'You lie awake and fancy sounds which have no existence, or at any rate do not exist within the house.'

'I tell you this sound awoke me,' replied the other still more impatiently. 'I was sleeping tolerably when the sound of that hateful footstep startled me into perfect wakefulness. There was a nameless horror to my mind in that stealthy tread. It sounded like the step of an assassin.'

'Come, Mr. Sivewright,' said Lucius in that practical tone which does much to tranquillise a nervous patient, 'if this is, as I firmly believe it to be, a mere delusion of your senses, it will be easiest dispelled by investigation. Let us face the unknown foe, and make a speedy end of him. Suffer me to keep watch to-night in this room, unknown to all in the house except yourself, and I will answer for it the ghost shall be laid.'

'No,' answered Mr. Sivewright doggedly. 'I am not so childish or so weak-minded as to ask another man to corroborate the evidence of my own senses. I tell you, Davoren, the thing is. If I believed in ghosts the matter would trouble me little enough.'

All the phantoms that were ever supposed to make night hideous might range these passages, and glide up and down yonder staircase at their pleasure. But I do not believe in the supernatural; and the sounds that I have heard are distinctly human.'

'Let me hear them too.'

'No, I tell you,' answered the patient with smothered anger; 'I will have no one to play the spy upon my slumber. If this is the delusion of an enfeebled brain, I have sense enough left to find out the falsehood for myself. Besides, the intruder, if there be one, cannot do me any harm. Yonder door is securely locked every night.'

'Can you trust the lock?'

'Do you think I should have put a bad one to a room that contains such treasures? No, the lock is one I chose myself, and would baffle a practised burglar. There is the same kind of lock on yonder door, communicating with the dressing-room. I turn the key in both with my own hand every night after Wincher has left me. I am still strong enough to move about the room, though I feel my strength lessening day by day. God pity me when I lie helpless on yonder bed, as I must do soon.'

'Nay, my dear sir, let us hope for a favourable change ere long.'

‘I have almost left off hoping,’ answered the old man wearily. ‘All the drugs in your surgery will not cure me. I am tired of trying first this medicine and then that. For some time, indeed, I believed that you understood my case; that your medicines were of some good to me. Within the last three weeks they have seemed only to aggravate my disorder.’

Lucius took up a medicine bottle from the little table by the bed half absently. It was empty.

‘When did you take your last dose?’ he asked.

‘Half-an-hour ago.’

‘I will try to find you a new tonic; something that shall not produce the nausea you have complained of lately. I cannot understand how this mixture should have had such an effect; but it is just possible you may have an antipathy to quinine. I will give you a medicine without any quinine.’

Mr. Sivewright gave an impatient sigh, expressive of non-belief in the whole faculty of medicine.

‘Do what you please with me,’ he said. ‘If you do not succeed in lengthening my life, I suppose I may depend upon your not shortening it. And as you charge me nothing for your services, I have no right to complain if their value corresponds with the rate of your recompense.’



‘I am sorry to see you have lost confidence in me, sir,’ said Lucius, somewhat wounded, yet willing to forgive a sick man’s petulance.

‘I have not lost confidence in you individually. It is the science of medicine which I disbelieve in. Here am I, after four months’ patient observance of your regimen, eating, drinking, sleeping, ay, almost thinking according to your advice, and yet I am no better at the end of it all, but feel myself growing daily worse. If all your endeavours to patch up a broken constitution have resulted only in failure, why do you not tell me so without farther parley? I told you at the beginning that I was stoic enough to receive my death-warrant without a pang.’

‘And I tell you again, as I told you then, that I have no sentence of death to pronounce. I confess that your symptoms during the last three weeks have somewhat puzzled me. If they continue to do so, I shall ask your permission to consult a medical man of wider experience than my own.’

‘No,’ answered the old man captiously, ‘I will see no strangers. I will be experimentalised upon by no new hand. If you can’t cure me, put me down as incurable. And now you had better go to your other patients; I have kept you later than usual. You will come back in the evening, I suppose?’

‘Most certainly.’

‘Very well, then, devote your evening to me, for once in a way, instead of to Lucille. You will have plenty of her society by and by, when she is your wife. I want to talk seriously with you. The time has come when there must be no more concealment between you and me. There are secrets which a man may do wisely to keep through life, but which it is fatal to carry to the grave. Give me your hand, Lucius,’ he said, stretching out his wasted fingers to meet the strong grasp of the surgeon; ‘we have not known each other long, yet as much as I can trust anybody I trust you; as much as I can love anybody—since my son turned my milk of human kindness to gall—I love you. Come back to me this evening, and I will prove to you that this is no idle protestation.’

The thin hand trembled in Lucius Davoren’s grasp. There was more emotion in these words of Homer Sivewright’s than Lucius had supposed the old man capable of feeling.

‘Whatever service you may require of me, whatever trust you may confide in me,’ said the surgeon with warmth, ‘be assured that the service shall be faithfully performed, the trust held sacred.’ And thus they parted.

## CHAPTER III.

### HOMER SIVEWRIGHT'S LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT.

It was nearly dusk that evening when Lucius returned to Cedar House. His daily round had occupied more time than usual, and however full his mind might be of that strange old man, or of the woman he loved, he did not shorten a visit or neglect the smallest detail of his duty. The lamp was lighted in Mr. Sivewright's room, though it was not yet dark outside—only the sultry dusk of a late summer day. The day had been oppressive, and the Shadrack district had a prostrate air in its parched dustiness, like a camel in the desert panting for distant waterpools. The low leaden sky had threatened a storm since noon, and the denizens of the Shadrack-road, more especially the feminine population, had been so fluttered and disturbed by the expectation of the coming tempest as to be unable, in their own language, 'to set to anything,' all day long. Work at the washtub had progressed

slowly, wringing had hung on hand, and the very mangles of Shadrack had turned listlessly under the influence of the weather. It was the cholera season, too—a period which set in as regularly in this district as the gambling season or the water-drinking season at Homburg or Baden, or the bathing season at Ostend or Biarritz. Stone-fruit was selling cheaply on the hawkers' barrows, cucumbers were at a discount, vegetable marrows met with no inquiry, conger eel and mackarel were unpopular, and even salmon was not a stranger to the barrows. All the wealth of the vanishing summer—luxuries which a few short weeks ago had been counted amongst the delicacies of the season, and paid for accordingly—had drifted this way on the strong tide of time, and lay as it were at the feet of the Shadrackites. Upon which the Shadrackites, looking askant at the costermongers' barrows, remarked that cholera was about.

Mr. Davoren found his patient seated before a writing-table, which he had never until now seen opened. It was that kind of writing-table which is called a *bonheur du jour*, a small table provided with numerous drawers; an ebony table, inlaid with brass and tortoiseshell, with brass mounts; a table which, according to Mr. Sivewright, had been made by no lesser hands than those of Francis Boule. The lamp

stood on this table, all the drawers were open and brimming over with papers, and before it, wrapped in his ancient dressing-gown of faded damask, sat the old man.

'I beg your pardon, sir,' said Lucius, about to withdraw, for he knew that his patient had strange secret ways about his papers. 'You are not ready for me, perhaps. I'll go down and talk to Lucille for a few minutes.'

'Do nothing of the kind; I am quite ready for you. These papers have much to do with what I am going to say. Come in, and lock the door. I have locked the other door myself. I want to be secure from the possibility of interruption. And now sit down by my side.'

Lucius obeyed without a word.

'Now,' said Mr. Sivewright, with the old keen look and sharp tone, the natural energy in the man dominating even the prostration of sickness, 'give me a straight answer to a straight question. You have had the run of this house for a long time; have seen everything, have had time to form your judgment: which do you think me now—a poor man or a miser?'

'You will not be offended by my candour?' inquired Lucius.

‘Certainly not. Have I not enjoined you to be candid?’

‘Then,’ replied the other, with a grave smile, ‘I admit that, in spite of your protestations of poverty, I have thought you rich. Until a short time ago, indeed, I was inclined to believe your statement; I really thought that you had sunk all your money in the purchase of these things,’ with that half-contemptuous glance at the art-treasures which Mr. Sivewright had before observed; ‘but when you spoke the other day of a possible intruder in this house with so much alarm, I told myself that if you had nothing to lose—or nothing more portable than yonder mummy or this desk—you could hardly cherish the suspicion of foul play.’

‘Fairly reasoned. Then you thought, because I was alarmed by the idea of a secret visitant prowling about my house in the dead of the night, that I must needs have some secret hoard, some hidden treasure for whose safety I feared?’

‘That was almost my thought.’

‘There you were wrong; but only so far were you wrong,’ answered Mr. Sivewright, with unwonted energy. ‘I am not such a baby as to hoard my guineas in an old muniment-chest, for the babyish pleasure of gloating over my treasure in the stillness

of the night—letting the golden coins run like glittering yellow water through my fingers; counting and recounting; stacking the gold into little piles, twenties, fifties, hundreds. No. I am a miser—granted; but I am not a fool. There is nothing in this house but the objects which you have seen; but those are worth a fortune. This very table at which I am now sitting, and which to your uneducated eye doubtless seems a trumpery gimcrack thing, was sold at Christie's three years ago for a hundred and twenty pounds, and will sell a year hence for half as much again. The value of money is diminishing year by year; the number of wealthy buyers is increasing year by year; and these treasures and relics of the past—specimens of manufactures that have perished, of arts that are forgotten, the handiwork of genius which has left no inheritors—these cannot multiply. The capital these represent is large, and whenever they are put up to auction in Christie and Manson's sale-rooms, that capital will be quadrupled. I do not speak at random, Davoren; I know my trade. After the apprenticeship of a lifetime I can venture to speak boldly. I have spent something like ten thousand pounds upon the treasures of this house, and I consider that ten thousand of sunk capital to represent between forty and fifty thousand in the future.'



Lucius looked at the speaker mute with astonishment. Was this utter madness? The hallucination of a mind which had become distorted by constant dwelling upon one subject? The wild dream of an art fanatic? Homer Sivewright's calm and serious air—the business-like manner of his statement— forbade the idea. He might deceive himself as to the value of his possessions; but there was no madness here.

'You do not believe me,' said Mr. Sivewright, taking the surgeon's wondering silence as the indication of his incredulity. 'You think I am a doting old fool; that I must be stark mad when I tell you that I, who have lived as poorly as an anchorite, have been content to sink ten thousand pounds—representing at five per cent five hundred a year—in the purchase of things which, to your untutored judgment, may perhaps appear so much second-hand trumpery.'

'No,' answered Lucius slowly, like a man awakening from a dream; 'I can appreciate the value and the beauty of many among your treasures. But ten thousand pounds—the sum seems prodigious.'

'A mere bagatelle compared with the sums that have been sunk in the same kind of property. But I have never bought unless I could buy a bargain. I am an old hand—cautious as a fox. I have not dis-

puted the possession of a Sèvres tea-cup or a Dresden snuff-box with wealthy amateurs. I have waited my chance, and bought gems which the common herd were too ignorant to appreciate. I have picked up my treasures in odd nooks and corners; have travelled half over Europe in quest of spoil. Thus my ten thousand pounds represent thirty thousand of another man's money.'

'And you have given up your declining years to constant labour; you have racked your brains with never-ending calculations; and you have lived, as you say, like an anchorite—for what result? Only to amass this heap of things—as useless for any of the practical needs of life as they are artistically beautiful. You have pinched and scraped and toiled—shortened your own life, and robbed your grandchild of every joy that makes youth worth having. Good heavens,' exclaimed Lucius, indignant at the thought of that joyless existence to which this old man had condemned Lucille, 'was there ever such folly! Nay, it is worse than folly, it is a crime—a sin against yourself, whom you have robbed of natural rest, and all the comforts to which men look forward as the solace of age—a still greater sin against that unselfish girl whose life you have filled with care and trouble.'

This reproach struck home. The old man sighed

heavily, his head drooped upon his breast, and he covered his face with his thin hand.

‘Why have you made this insensate use of your money?’ exclaimed Lucius. ‘What madness possessed you?’

‘The madness men call revenge,’ cried Mr. Sive-wright, uncovering his face and lifting his head proudly. ‘Listen, Lucius Davoren, and when you have heard my story, call me a madman if you will. You will at least perceive that there has been a fixed purpose in all I did. When my false ungrateful son—whom I had loved with all the weak indulgent affection of the solitary man who concentrates all his store of feeling upon one object, his only child—when my wicked son left me, he left me impoverished by his theft, and, as he doubtless believed, ruined for life. He shook the dust of my house from his feet, and went out into the world, never intending to recross my threshold. I had nothing more that could tempt him. My stock had been diminishing daily under his dishonest hands; the sacrifice I had made to secure the new premises shrunk it to a vanishing point. Thus he left me, to all intents and purposes a beggar. It was the old story of the squeezed orange. He had no compunction in flinging away the rind.’

'He used you hardly,' said Lucius, 'like a villain as he was.'

'On the night after he left me, I sat alone by my miserable hearth, in that room which had never witnessed one hour of domestic peace! I sat alone, and brooded over my wrongs. Then it seemed to me almost as if that very devil who came to Dr. Faustus in his study came and stood behind my chair, and whispered in my ear. "Come," said the fiend, "love is worn out, but there is one thing left you still—revenge. Grow rich, and this base son, who leaves you to perish like a maimed lion in his den, will come back and fawn upon you for your money. Grow rich again; show him what might have been his reward had he behaved decently to you. Let him lie at your door and starve, and beg as Dives begged for a drop of water, and be refused. Then it will be your turn to laugh, as he no doubt is now laughing at you.''

'A strange suggestion, and worthy to come from the spirit of evil,' said Lucius.

'I cared not if it came straight from Lucifer,' answered the other passionately. 'From that hour I lived only to make money. I had lived for little else before, you will say, perhaps; but I worked harder now. Fortune seemed to favour me, just as

the Fates seem now and then to favour the desperate gamester. I made some lucky sales with the shrunken remnant of my stock. I found gems in queer out-of-the-way places; for at this time I was endowed with an almost superhuman activity, and travelled many miles every day. I roamed the Continent, and brought home wonders of art. I acquired a reputation for finding objects of rarest merit, and celebrated collectors paid me my price without a murmur. So I worked on, until the expiry of my lease found me with a large stock and some thousands in hand. Then the idea suddenly occurred to me that my best chance of dying a rich man—or of doubling, tripling, or quadrupling my capital before I died—was to let my stock lie fallow. I surrendered my premises rather than pay the enormous rent which the landlord demanded for them. I might have sold my stock, and retired with a comfortable income; but I determined to keep it, and die worth fifty thousand pounds. I found this old house—roomy and secluded; I brought my wealth here. There are cases of rare old china stowed away in some of the rooms which you have not even seen. Since I came here, I went on buying, so long as my funds would admit; and since the exhaustion of my capital, I have done a good deal of business in the way of

barter—weeding out objects of lesser value from my collection, and making many a good bargain with dealers who only half know their trade. Thus even after my funds were gone I managed to enrich my collection.'

'And now, I conclude,' said Lucius, 'that your chief pleasure is the idea of giving your name to a museum—of leaving behind you a memorial which shall survive for generations to come?'

'I have no such thought,' answered the other. 'My talk of leaving these things to the nation was but an idle threat. No, Lucius, my dream and my hope from the time of my son's desertion have been the realisation of a large fortune—you understand, a fortune—a fortune to be left away from that base boy—a fortune which he should hear of, whose full extent should be known to him; wealth that he should hunger for, while he lay in the gutter. I have made the fortune, Lucius, and I leave it all to you. That is my revenge.'

'To *me*!' cried Lucius, aghast.

'To you. But mind, not a sixpence, not a half-penny, to that man, should he come whining to you; not a crust of bread to ward off the pangs of starvation.'

'You have left everything to me,' said Lucius,

with undiminished surprise, 'to me! You pass over your granddaughter, your own flesh and blood, to make me your heir!'

'What does it matter whether it goes to you or Lucille?' asked Mr. Sivewright impatiently. 'You love her?'

'With all the strength of my heart.'

'And she is to be your wife. She will have the full benefit of all I leave you. Were it left to her—settled upon her ever so tightly, for her sole use and benefit, and so on, as the lawyers have it—you would have the advantage all the same. She would surrender all her rights to you. But she would do something worse than that. She has a foolish sentimental idea about that infamous father of hers; she would let him share the money. That is why I bequeath everything to you.'

'The precaution is needless, sir,' replied Lucius gravely. 'I have reason to know that your son no longer lives to trouble you or his daughter.'

'You have reason to know!' cried the old man angrily. 'What do you know about my son? And why have you withheld your knowledge from me until this moment?'

'Because it is only within the last few weeks that I have discovered your son's identity with a man I



met in America, and I did not care to disturb you by any allusion to an agitating subject.'

'Who was this man?'

'You will not speak of this to Lucille? She knows nothing—she must know nothing of—of her father's death,' said Lucius, with painful eagerness.

He had spoken rashly, and found himself, as it were, caught in the meshes of his own ill-advised admission.

'She shall know nothing, if you insist upon it. For God's sake, don't trifle with me. Is my son dead?'

He asked the question with as agonising an anxiety as if the son he had long ago renounced were at this moment the idol of his heart.

'I have good reason to believe that he is dead.'

'That is no answer. Give me details, particulars—time, place, the manner of his death.'

'I—I can only tell you what I know,' answered Lucius, pale to the lips. 'There was a portrait amongst the lumber in your loft—the portrait of a young man with dark hair and eyes.'

'There was but one portrait there,' answered the old man quickly—'my son's.'

'That picture resembles a man I once met in America, who, I afterwards heard, was shot.'

‘How? by whom?’

‘That I cannot tell you. You must accept the evidence for what it is worth.’

‘I reject it as worthless. What, you see a picture among the lumber in the loft which reminds you of a face you saw in America—the face of some man who may or may not have been killed in some gold-diggers’ fray, I suppose—and you jump at the conclusion that my son is dead; that the order of nature has been reversed, and the green tree has fallen before the disabled trunk! You tell me, on no better evidence than this, that my dream of revenge has been vain; that my ungrateful son will never hear, with all the pangs of baffled avarice, of his dead father’s wealth—of wealth that might have been his had he been simply honest.’

‘Say that I am mistaken, then,’ replied Lucius, infinitely relieved by the old man’s incredulity. How could he have answered if Mr. Sivewright had questioned him closely? He was not schooled in falsehood. The horrible truth might have been wrung from him in spite of himself. ‘Say that your son still lives,’ he went on. ‘I accept your trust, and thank you for your confidence in me. I shall receive your wealth, and may it be long ere it falls to my hands—rather as a trustee than an inheritor—for to

my mind it will always belong to Lucille, and not to me.'

'And you swear that my wicked son shall never profit by my hard-earned gains?'

'I swear it,' said Lucius.

'Then I am satisfied. My will is straight and simple, and leaves all to you without reserve. It has been duly witnessed, and lies in this inner drawer.' He lifted the flap of the table, and showed Lucius a concealed drawer at the back. 'You will remember?'

'Yes,' answered the surgeon, 'but I trust in God that it may be long ere that document is needed.'

'That is a polite speech common to heirs,' answered Mr. Sivewright, with a touch of bitterness. 'But you have been very good to me,' he added in a softer tone; 'and I like you. Nay, could I believe in the existence of friendship, I should be induced to think that you return my liking.'

'I do, sir, with all my heart,' returned Lucius. 'Your eccentricities kept us asunder for some time; but since you have treated me with confidence—since you have bared your heart to me, with its heavy burden of past wrongs and sorrows—you have drawn me very near to you. I deplore the mistaken principle which has guided your later life; but I cannot but acknowledge the magnitude of the wrong which in-

spired that dream of revenge. Yet, while I accept the trust which you are generous enough to confide in me, I regret that I should profit by your anger against another. If I did not think your son was dead—that all hope of earthly atonement for his wrong-doing is over—I should refuse to subscribe to the conditions of your bequest.'

'Say no more about his death,' exclaimed the old man, 'or you will make me angry. Now one more word about business. If, immediately after my death, you want money, sell my collection at once. You will find a catalogue, and detached instructions as to the manner of the sale, in this desk. If, on the other hand, you can afford to wait for your fortune—if you want the present value of those things to double itself—wait twenty years, and sell them before your eldest child comes of age. In that case, you will have a fortune large enough to make your sons great merchants—to dower half-a-dozen daughters.'

'I shall not be too eager to turn your treasures into money, believe me, sir,' answered Lucius.

'Good,' said Mr. Sivewright. 'I bought those things to sell again—speculated in them as a broker speculates in shares. Yet it gives me a sharp pang to think of their being scattered. They represent all the experience of my life, my youthful worship of art,

the knowledge of my later years. I have looked at them, and handled them, till they seem to me like sentient things.'

'Even Pharaoh yonder,' said Lucius with a smile, anxious to turn the current of his patient's thoughts, which had been dwelling too long upon painful themes, 'though he seems scarcely a lively object to adorn a bedchamber.'

'Pharaoh was a bargain,' answered Mr. Sivewright, 'or I shouldn't have bought him. The manufacture of mummies is one of the extinct arts, and the article must rise in market value with the lapse of years. New towns spring up; provincial museums multiply—each must have its mummy.'

'Come, Mr. Sivewright, you have been talking rather more than is good for an invalid. May I unlock those doors, and ring for your supper?'

'Yes, if you forbid further talk, but I have something more, another matter, and one of some importance, to discuss with you.'

'Let that stand over till to-morrow. You have fatigued and excited yourself too much already. I will be with you at the same time to-morrow evening, if you like.'

'Do, there is something I am anxious to speak about; not quite so important as the subject of our

conversation to-night, but yet something that ought to be spoken of. Come to-morrow evening at the same time. Yes, you are right, I have tired myself already.'

Mr. Sivewright flung himself back in his chair exhausted. Lucius reproached himself for having suffered his patient to talk so much, and upon so agitating a topic. He stayed while the old man sipped a cup of beef-tea, which he finished with a painful effort; Lucille standing by, and looking on anxiously all the while. She had brought the little supper-tray from the adjoining room with her own hands.

'Do try to eat it, dear grandpapa,' she said, as Mr. Sivewright trifled with his spoon, and looked despondently at the half-filled cup. 'I made it myself, on purpose that it should be good and strong.'

'It is good enough, child, if you could give me the inclination to eat,' answered the old man, pushing away the cup with a sigh; 'and now good-night to you both. I am tired, and shall go to bed at once.'

'Don't lock the dressing-room door to-night, grandpapa,' said Lucille. 'I am going to sleep there in future, so that I may be close at hand if you should want anything in the night.'

'I never want anything in the night,' answered Mr. Sivewright impatiently. 'You may just as well sleep in your own room.'

'But I like to be near you, grandpapa, and Lucius says you ought to take a little beef-tea very early in the morning. Please leave the door unlocked.'

'Very well; but, in that case, mind you lock the outer door.'

'I will be careful to do so, grandpapa.'

'Be sure of that. This change of rooms is a foolish fancy: but I am too feeble to dispute the point. Good-night.'

He dismissed them both with a wave of his hand—the grandchild who represented the sum-total of his kindred, and the man to whom he had bequeathed his fortune.

Lucille and Lucius went down-stairs together, but both were curiously silent.

The surgeon's mind was full of that strange conversation with Homer Sivewright; the girl had a pre-occupied air.

In the dimly-lighted hall she paused, by the open door of the sitting-room, where Mrs. Wincher had just put down the little tray with her young mistress's meagre supper.



‘Will you come into the parlour for a little while, Lucius?’ she asked, as her lover lingered on the threshold with an undecided air. Something unfamiliar in the tone of her voice jarred upon his ear.

‘You ask the question almost as if you wished me to say no, Lucille,’ he said.

‘I am rather tired,’ she answered faintly, ‘and I am sure you must be tired too, you have been so long up-stairs with grandpapa. It has struck ten.’

‘That sounds like my dismissal,’ said Lucius, scrutinising the pale face, in which there was a troubled expression that he had never seen there until of late; ‘so I will say good-night, though I had something to tell you, had you been inclined to listen.’

‘Tell me all to-morrow, Lucius.’

‘It shall be to-morrow then, dearest. Good-night.’

And thus with one tender kiss he left her.

## CHAPTER IV.

WHAT LUCIUS SAW BETWIXT MIDNIGHT AND MORNING.

THE sky was starless above the Shadrack-road, and the air hardly less oppressive than it had been in the sultry noontide. That low sky seemed to shut in the Shadrack district like an iron roof, and the Shadrackites lounging against their doorposts, or conversing at street corners, or congregating in small clusters outside public-houses, bemoaned themselves that the storm had not yet come.

Lucius left Cedar House heavy-hearted, in spite of the knowledge that he, who yesterday knew not of a creature in this universe likely to leave him a five-pound note, was to-night heir to a handsome fortune. The thought of Mr. Sivewright's generosity in no manner elated him. Had his mind been free to contemplate this fact he would, no doubt, have rejoiced in the new sense of security which such a prospect must have inspired; he would have rejoiced not alone for himself, but for the sake of the woman who was to be

his wife. Through the thick tangle of his troubled thoughts no gleam of light could penetrate. He saw himself the centre of perplexities. It seemed almost as if the avenging shade of the man he had slain were hunting him down—tempting him to entangle himself by some foolish confession, urging him to some folly that must bring about his own destruction. He thought of Orestes pursued by the Eumenides—tortured by the burden of a crime which, at the hour of its commission, he had deemed an act of justice.

Instead of turning homewards as usual, he paused for a minute or so outside the iron gate, and then took the opposite direction, setting his face towards the distant country. It was only a fancy, perhaps, but it seemed to him that the atmosphere was a shade less oppressive when he turned his back upon Shadrack Basin and the steam factories which encompassed it. No rain came to cool the fever-parched city, nor had the first low note of the impending storm sounded in distant thunder. Yet that coming storm was no less a certainty.

There was a strange bewilderment in the surgeon's mind. That promise of wealth, ease, security, a more speedily-won renown, all the benefits which go hand-in-hand with the possession of ample means, had excited his brain, although it had not elated his spirits.

He saw all the scheme of his future altered. No longer need he toil in this wretched district. He might at once establish himself amongst the most famous of his fellow workers ; make known his new theories, his discoveries in the vast world of medical science ; do good on a scale infinitely larger than that afforded by his present surroundings. It was not that he wanted to turn his back upon the suffering poor. His brightest hopes, his fondest dreams, were of the good he was to do for these. He only desired that his light might not be for ever hidden under a bushel. Strong in the belief that he could serve the whole race of man, he languished to shake off those fetters, forged by necessity, which kept him chained to this obscure corner of the earth.

With the thought of his improved prospects, and all the hopes that went along with that thought, there mingled that ever-brooding care about the past. He had perceived a curious change in Lucille's manner to-night. Could she have discovered anything ? How anxious she had been to get rid of him ! She had not seemed exactly cold or unkind, but her manner had been hurried, excited ; as if her mind were occupied with some all-absorbing thought in which he had no part.

‘If, by some fatal chance, she had discovered

the true story of her father's fate,' he told himself, 'she would hardly have concealed her knowledge; she would have surely told me the truth at once, and dismissed me for ever. I cannot imagine her acting in any double or underhanded manner. Yet to-night it seemed as if she had something to hide from me.'

This fancy troubled him; and in spite of his endeavours to dismiss the suspicion as groundless, the thought recurred to him every now and then. He walked far along the Shadrack-road, farther than he had penetrated for many a day; walked on, meditative, and hardly conscious where he went, until he came to a region of deserted building-ground, upon which a few skeleton houses lifted their roofless walls to the blank sky, as if demanding of the gods wherefore the speculative builder—long since stranded on the reefy shore of the bankruptcy court—came not to finish them.

This arid plain, which had erst been pleasant meadow-land, and where the shorn remnant of a once-beauteous hawthorn hedge still languished here and there under a cloud of lime dust, was the nearest approach to a rustic landscape within reach of the Shadrackites. Its beauty did not tempt the pedestrian.

Lucius halted at sight of the skeleton houses, and having in some measure walked down his excitement, turned back. He did not, however, take exactly the same way by which he had come. The prospect of the Shadrack-road, in all its dreary length, may have appalled him, or it may have been mere vagrant fancy which led him to return by a long narrow street, straggling and poverty-stricken, yet boasting here and there some good old red-brick mansion, which had once been the country seat of a prosperous City merchant, but which now, shorn of its garden, and defaced by neglect and decay, was let off in divers tenements to the struggling poor.

This street, with all its byways, was familiar to Lucius, who had plenty of patients in those squalid houses, down those narrow side streets, courts, and alleys. He knew every turn of the place, and wandered on to-night, not troubling himself which way he went, so long as he kept in a general manner the homeward direction. It had struck twelve when he emerged from a darksome alley on to the wharf which formed one side of the narrow creek whereon Mr. Sivewright's garden abutted.

There were the dingy barges moored side by side upon the stagnant water; and there above them, dark

against the sky, loomed the outline of the house that sheltered all Lucius Davoren most fondly loved. He had wandered to this spot almost unawares.

‘ I arise from dreams of thee,  
And a spirit in my feet  
Has led me—who knows how?  
To thy chamber-window, sweet !’

murmured the lover, as he looked up at those blank windows.

There was a faint light in one, the little dressing-room next Mr. Sivewright’s bedchamber, the room now occupied by Lucille. Yes, and there was one more light—the yellow flame of a candle in one of the upper windows, a window in that topmost story, which Lucille had declared to be utterly uninhabited.

The sight struck Lucius with a vague suspicion—a feeling almost of alarm.

How should there be a light up yonder in one of those unoccupied rooms? Could it be Jacob Wincer, prowling about after midnight, to inspect the treasures of which he was guardian. It was just possible there might be some part of the bric-à-brac merchant’s collection in one of those upper rooms. Yet Lucille had declared that they were quite empty—and his own inspection through the keyholes had revealed nothing worth speaking of within. And



again, how foreign to Jacob Wincher's orderly habits to be roaming about with a candle at such an hour !

The gleam of that solitary candle amidst all those dark upper windows mystified Lucius beyond measure.

'If it is old Wincher who has carried the light up yonder, it will move presently,' thought Lucius ; 'he would not stay there long at such a late hour. I'll wait and see the end of the business.'

The first note of the storm sounded as he made this resolve, a rumble of distant thunder, and then came the heavy patter of big rain-drops, shedding coolness upon the thunder-charged air. There was an open shed close at hand, and Lucius withdrew to its shelter without losing sight of the dark old house opposite, with its two lighted windows.

The water and the barges lay between him and Cedar House, the wharf—used at this time as a repository for spelter—being built upon a narrow creek, or inlet from the river.

He stood and watched for nearly half an hour, while the rain came down heavily and the lightning flashed across his face every now and then ; but still the light burnt steadily. What could Wincher or anybody else be doing in yonder room at such an hour ? Or could it be Homer Sivewright himself, roaming the house like an unquiet spirit ?

‘No,’ Lucius thought, ‘he has not strength enough to mount those steep stairs without help. It cannot be Sivewright.’

Did the circumstance—trivial enough in itself, perhaps, but painfully perplexing to that anxious watcher—mean any harm? That was the question. Did it denote any peril to Lucille? Ought he to go round to the front of the house, and try to arouse the sleeping household, in order to warn them of some unknown danger? That seemed a desperate thing to do, when the circumstance, after all, might be of no moment. It was most likely Jacob Wincher. He might have eccentricities that Lucius had never heard of; and to sit up late into the night was perhaps one of his failings.

Yet that mysterious light, taken in conjunction with Mr. Sivewright’s fancy about strange footsteps in the dead of the night, was not a fact to be dismissed carelessly.

‘If there were any way of getting into the house without ringing people up and frightening my patient, I would get in somehow, and find the solution of this enigma,’ thought Lucius; ‘but I daresay the doors and windows at the back are firmly fastened.’

A distant clock chimed the quarter before one, while Lucius was standing irresolute under the spel-

ter shed. While the third slow chime was still vibrating in the silent night, the blue glare of a lightning-flash showed that eager watcher a figure upon one of the barges.

Until this moment he had believed them utterly empty, save of their cargo ; nor did this figure belong to either of those darksome vessels. It was the figure of a man, tall and lithe, who moved quickly along, bending his body as he crept from one barge to the other, as if shrinking from the pelting rain—a stealthy figure, upon which Lucius at once concentrated his attention.

He had not long to remain in doubt. The man lifted his head presently, and looked up towards the lighted window ; then, with the agility of some wild animal, sprang from the barge to the garden-wall. There Lucius lost him in the darkness.

Presently there came a long whistle—long but not loud ; then a light appeared in the lower part of the house—a light from an open door, evidently. Lucius saw the light appear and vanish, and heard the closing of a heavy door.

Some one had admitted that man to the house, but who was that some one ? There was foul play of some kind ; but what the nature of the mystery was a question he could not answer.

What should he do? Go round to the front gate, ring, and alarm the household? By that means only could he solve the mystery, and prove to Lucille that these Winchers, whose fidelity she believed in, were deceiving her. Yet to do that might be to imperil his patient, in whose weak state any violent shock might be well-nigh fatal.

Reflection convinced him that whatever mischief was at work in that house was of a subtle character. It could only mean plunder; for after all, to suppose that it involved any evil design against Homer Sive-wright's life seemed too improbable a notion to be entertained for a moment. The plot, whatever its nature, must mean plunder, and these Winchers, the trusted servants, in whom long service seemed a pledge of honesty, must be the moving spirits of the treason. What more likely than that Jacob Wincher, who knew the value of his master's treasures, was gradually plundering the collection of its richest gems, and that this stealthy intruder, who entered the house thus secretly under cover of night, was his accomplice, employed to carry away and dispose of the booty?

Arguing thus, Lucius decided that it would be a foolish thing to disturb the evildoers in the midst of their work. His wiser course would be to lie in wait,

watch the house till daybreak, and surprise the accomplice in the act of carrying off the plunder. As the man had gone in, so he must surely come out before morning. If, owing to the darkness of the night, he should escape the watcher's keen gaze on this occasion, Lucius determined that he would set one of the minions of Mr. Otranto, the private detective, to watch to-morrow night.

Lucius waited patiently, though those hours in the dead of the night went by with leaden pace, and every limb of the watcher became a burden to him from very weariness. He seated himself upon an empty cask in an angle of the shed, leaned his back against the wall, and waited; never relaxing his watch upon those quiet barges and the low garden-wall beyond them, never ceasing to listen intently for the least sound from that direction. The storm abated, heaven's floodgates were closed again; the lightning faded to fainter flashes and then ceased altogether; a distant rumble of thunder, like the sound of a door shutting after the exit of a disagreeable visitor, marked the end of the tempest. Peace descended once more upon earth, and coolness; a pleasant air crept along the narrow creek; even the odour of the damp earth was sweet after the heat and dryness of yesterday.

Morning came, and the aching of Lucius Davoren's

bones increased, but there was no sign from the barges or the garden-wall. The watcher was thoroughly wearied. His eyes had been striving to pierce the darkness, his ears had been strained to listen for the lightest sound during four long hours. At five o'clock he departed, not wishing to be surprised by early labourers coming his way, or by the traffic of the wharf, which might begin he knew not how soon. He went away, vexed and disquieted; thinking that it was just possible the man might have escaped him after all in the darkness.

'I shouldn't have seen him in the first instance without the aid of that lightning-flash,' he said to himself; 'I may very easily have missed him afterwards. I'll go home and get two or three hours' sleep if I can, and then go straight to Cedar House and try to solve this mystery.'

## CHAPTER V.

### LUCIUS AT FAULT.

AT nine o'clock Lucius stood before the tall iron gate waiting for admittance to Mr. Sivewright's dwelling. In spite of his weariness, he had slept but little in the interval. The fever of his brain was not to be beguiled into slumber. He could only go over the same ground again and again, trying to convince himself that the mystery of that secret entrance to Cedar House was a very simple matter and would be made clear after a little trouble.

He scrutinised Mrs. Wincher keenly, as she unlocked the gate and conducted him across the forecourt; but nothing in the aspect of Mr. Wincher's good lady indicated agitation or emotion of any kind whatsoever. If this woman were involved in some nightly act of wrong-doing against her master, she was evidently hardened in iniquity. Her face, not altogether free from the traces of a blacklead brush, with which she may perchance have brushed aside an importunate fly, was placidity itself.



‘ You’re more than usual early this morning, Dr. Davory,’ she said with her friendly air; ‘ you did ought to give yourself a little more rest.’

‘ I couldn’t rest this morning, Mrs. Wincher,’ answered Lucius thoughtfully; ‘ I was too anxious.’

‘ Not about the old gentleman, I hope?’

‘ Well, partly on his account, and partly upon other grounds. I have an idea that this house is not quite so safe as it might be.’

‘ Lord bless you, sir, not safe, when I bolts every blessed door, and puts up every blessed bar, just as if it was chock full of state prisoners! And what is there for any one to steal except the bricklebrack, and nobody in these parts would know the vally o’ that. I’m sure I’ve lived among it five-and-twenty year myself, and can’t see no use in it, nor no beauty in it neither. Depend upon it, nobody would ever come arter bricklebrack.’

‘ I don’t know, Mrs. Wincher,’ answered Lucius; ‘ people will come after anything, as long as it’s worth money.’

‘ Let ’em come, then,’ exclaimed the matron contemptuously; ‘ I give ’em leave to get into this house after dark if they can.’

‘ How if some one were to be obliging, though, and let them in?’

‘ Who is there to do that, unless it was me or my good gentleman,’ cried Mrs. Wincher, blushing indignantly through the blacklead, ‘ and I suppose you’re not going to suspect us, Dr. Davory, after five-and-twenty years’ faithful service? Let any one in, indeed, to make away with the bricklebrack! Why, my good gentleman would fret hissself to fiddle-strings if he was to crack a teacup.’

Indignation lent shrillness to the voice of Mrs. Wincher, and this conversation, which took place in the hall, made itself audible in the parlour. The door was opened quickly, and Lucille appeared on the threshold, very pale, and with that troubled look in her face which Lucius had seen at parting with her the night before.

‘ What is the matter?’ she asked anxiously, ‘ what are you talking so loud about, Wincher?’ She took Lucius’s offered hand absently, hardly looking at him, and evidently disturbed by some apprehension of evil.

‘ Nothink pertiklar, Miss Lucille,’ replied Mrs. Wincher, tossing her head; ‘ only I’m not a stone, and when people throws out their insinventions at me I feels it. As if me or my good gentleman was capable of making away with the bricklebrack.’

‘ What do you mean, Wincher?’

‘Ask him,’ said Mrs. Wincher, pointing to Lucius; ‘I suppose he knows what he means hisself, but I’m sure I don’t;’ with which remark the matron withdrew to the back premises to resume her black-lead brush.

‘What have you been saying to offend Mrs. Wincher, Lucius?’ asked Lucille.

‘Not much, dearest, but if you’ll listen to me for a few minutes I’ll endeavour to explain.’

He followed her into the parlour and shut the door.

‘Why, Lucille,’ he said, drawing her towards the window, and looking at the pale thoughtful face, ‘how ill you look!’

‘I am anxious about my grandfather,’ she said hurriedly. ‘Never mind my looks, Lucius; only contrive to cure him, and I daresay I shall soon be quite well again.’

‘But you have no right to be anxious, Lucille,’ he answered; ‘can you not trust me? Do you not believe that I shall do all that care and skill can do, and that, if at any moment I see reason to doubt my own power to deal with this case, I shall call in some famous doctor to aid me?’

‘I believe you will do all that is wise and right; but still I cannot help feeling anxious. Do not take

any notice of me. I pray Heaven that all may come right in time.'

She said this with a weary air, as if almost worn out with care. It seemed cruel to trouble her at such a time, and yet Lucius could not refrain from some endeavour to solve the mystery of that scene last night.

'Lucille,' he began seriously, 'you must promise not to be angry with me, nor to be alarmed by anything I may say.'

'I can't promise that,' she said, with a shade of impatience; not quite the old sweetness that had charmed and won him; 'you are full of strange fancies and terrors. What was that you were saying to Mrs. Wincher just now?'

'I was only hinting at a suspicion that has become almost a certainty. There is something wrong going on in this house, Lucille.'

She started, and the pale face grew a shade paler.

'What do you mean? What can be wrong?'

'There is foul play of some kind, a design against the property contained in this house. No doubt the report of its value has spread by this time; the house is known to be almost unoccupied. What more likely than that some one should attempt to plunder your grandfather's possessions? What more easy, above

all, if any one inside the house turned traitor and opened the door, in the dead of the night, to the intruder?’

‘Lucius!’

The name broke from her lips almost in a scream, and it seemed as if Lucille would have dropped to the ground but for her lover’s supporting arm.

‘Lucille, is it worthy of you to be so terror-stricken? If there is danger to be met, can we not meet it together? Only trust me, darling, and all your fears will vanish. Believe me, I am strong enough to face any peril, if I have but your confidence. Accident has put me in possession of a secret connected with this house. Heaven knows what might have happened but for that providential discovery. But knowledge is power, and once aware of the danger, I shall find out how to cope with it.’

‘A discovery!’ she repeated with the same terror-stricken look. ‘What discovery?’

‘First, that the people you trust, these Winchers, whose fidelity has stood the test of five-and-twenty-years’ service, are improving their first opportunity to cheat. They are taking advantage of your grandfather’s helplessness. A man was admitted into this house secretly at one o’clock this morning.’

‘What folly!’ cried Lucille with a faint laugh.

‘What could have put such a delusion into your head? A man admitted to this house at one o’clock this morning! Even if such a thing could have happened, which of course is impossible, who could have informed you of the fact?’

‘My own eyes, which saw him clamber from the barges to the garden-wall, saw the gleam of a candle as a door was opened to admit him, saw a light burning in one of the upper windows—evidently a signal.’

‘*You saw?*’ cried Lucille with widely-opened eyes. ‘How could you see? What could have taken you to the back of this house in the middle of the night?’

‘Accident,’ answered Lucius, ‘or say rather Providence. I was out of spirits when I left you last night—your own manner, so unlike its usual kindness, disturbed me, and I had other agitating thoughts. I walked a long way down the Shadrack-road, and then returned by a back way, which brought me to the spelter-wharf opposite the garden. There the light in the upper story attracted my attention. I had heard from you that those upper rooms were never occupied. I waited, watched, and saw what I have just described.’

‘I would sooner believe it a delusion of your senses than the Winchers could be capable of treachery,’ said Lucille.

‘Do not talk any more about my senses deceiving me,’ replied Lucius decisively. ‘You told me I was the fool of my own senses when I saw some one open the door of one of the upper rooms, and then hurriedly shut it. Now I am certain that I was not deceived—there was some one hidden in that room. Remember, Lucille, I say again there is no cause for fear. But there is foul play of some kind, and it is our business to fathom it. We are not children, to leave ourselves at the mercy of any scoundrel who chooses to plunder or assail us. I shall bring a policeman to watch in this house to-night, and set another to watch the outside.’

The slender figure which his arm had until now sustained slipped suddenly from his hold, and Lucille sank unconscious to the ground.



## CHAPTER VI.

### THE PLUNDER OF THE MUNIMENT CHEST.

THE sight of the girl he fondly loved lying senseless at his feet, with a white face and closed eyelids, filled Lucius Davoren with unspeakable agony and remorse. How little had he calculated the effect of his words upon this too-sensitive nature! To him the danger involved in the plot which he suspected was but a small thing—a difficulty to be met and grappled with. That was all. But to this inexperienced girl the thought of a midnight intruder, of a stranger's secret entrance into the house, with the connivance of its treacherous inmates, was doubtless appalling.

Could he despise his betrothed for her want of courage? No! His first thought was professional. This sudden fainting fit was no doubt the evidence of weakened health. Days of patient attendance upon the invalid, nights rendered sleepless by anxiety, had done their work. Lucille's strength had given way—that change in her appearance and manner which

had so much disturbed him was but one of the indications of broken health. And he, who loved her better than life itself, felt himself guilty of cruel neglect in not having ere this discovered the truth. That gentle self-sacrificing spirit was stronger than the fragile frame which was its earthly temple.

He lifted her from the ground, placed her in Mr. Sivewright's easy-chair by the open window, and then rang the bell loudly.

Mrs. Wincher came, but entered the room with head flung back, and a lofty air, which might have become Queen Eleanor in the presence of Fair Rosamond. At sight of her unconscious mistress, however, Mrs. Wincher gave a piteous scream, and flew to her side.

'Whatever have you been and gone and said to this poor dear,' she exclaimed indignantly, flinging a scornful glance at Lucius, 'to make her faint dead off like that? I suppose you've been accusing *her* of robbing her grandfather. I'm sure it wouldn't surprise me if you had.'

'Don't be angry, Mrs. Wincher,' said Lucius; 'but bring me some cold water directly, and a little brandy.'

Mrs. Wincher, alarmed for the safety of her mistress, flew to fetch these restoratives, but obeyed Mr.

Davoren as it were, under protest, in his professional capacity.

A little care restored Lucille to consciousness, but even after she had recovered from her swoon, she seemed strangely shaken, and looked at her lover with an expression full of vague fear.

He began to reproach her, with infinite tenderness, for her neglect of her own health.

‘You have been doing too much, darling,’ he said, kissing the pale forehead that rested on his shoulder, ‘and I have been guilty of shameful neglect in allowing you to endanger your health. And now, dear, you must obey orders. You must go straight up to your room and let Wincher help you to bed, and lie there quietly all day long, and be fed with beef-tea and good old port until the colour comes back to those poor pale cheeks.’

Lucille persistently refused compliance with these injunctions.

‘Indeed, indeed, Lucius, there is nothing the matter with me,’ she said earnestly.

‘Nothing the matter when you fainted just now—a sure sign of extreme weakness—especially in one not accustomed to fainting?’

‘O, that was nothing. You frightened me so with your suggestions of danger.’

‘Do not be afraid any longer, dearest ; there is no danger that can assail you, except the danger of your ruining your health by refusing to be guided by my advice. You want rest, and ought to endeavour to get several hours’ good sleep.’

‘It wouldn’t be the least use for me to try to go to sleep before night,’ she said ; ‘my mind is much too active for that. I’ll obey you in anything else you like, Lucius, but don’t ask me to lie down in my room to-day. I should worry myself into a fever.’

‘Very well,’ replied Lucius, with a sigh ; ‘I won’t insist upon anything you object to. You can rest in this room. If I find your grandfather no better this morning I shall bring in a nurse.’

‘O, please don’t.’

‘Nonsense, Lucille. I am not going to allow your life to be sacrificed to your mistaken notion of duty. Some one must nurse Mr. Sivewright, and that some one must not be you.’

‘Let it be Mrs. Wincher, then.’

‘No ; I have not too high an opinion of these faithful Winchers. I shall bring in a woman upon whom I can rely.’

Lucille looked at him with that strange scared expression he had seen so often of late, and then said with some bitterness :

'It seems to me that you are master in this house, Lucius, so I suppose you must do as you please.'

'I only constitute myself master here when I see peril,' he replied calmly; 'and now, Lucille, try to obey me in some small measure at least. Let Mrs. Wincher bring a sofa of some kind to this room, and lie down and try to sleep. I will send you a tonic as soon as I get home. Good-bye.'

He bent down to kiss her as she sat in the arm-chair, where he had placed her, too weak to rise.

'Shall you come here again this evening?' she asked.

'Yes; your grandfather wants to talk to me about something, and I daresay I shall be an hour or so with him in the evening. After that I shall have something to tell you, Lucille, if you are well enough to hear it. Something pleasant.'

'You are not going to frighten me any more, I hope,' she said.

'No, darling, I will never again frighten you.'

'I daresay you despise me for my cowardice.'

'Despise you, Lucille? No, I only regard this nervous terror as a sign of weakened health. I am very sure it is not natural to you to be wanting in courage.'

‘No,’ she answered, with a faint sigh, ‘it is not natural to me.’

She turned her face away from him, and tears fell slowly from the sad eyes, as she faltered a faint good-bye in response to his tender leave-taking.

‘O, merciful God,’ she ejaculated, when the door had closed behind her lover, ‘Thou who knowest the weight of my burden, help me to bear it patiently.’

Lucius found no improvement in his patient—retrogression rather. But this might be fairly accounted for by Mr. Sivewright’s excitement of the night before.

‘I did very wrong to let you talk so much,’ said Lucius; ‘you are more feverish than usual this morning.’

‘I am altogether worse,’ answered the old man fretfully.

Then came a detailed account of his aches and pains. There were symptoms that puzzled the surgeon, despite his wide experience, and much wider study.

‘Let me bring a physician to see you this afternoon,’ said Lucius; ‘there is something in this case which I hardly feel myself strong enough to cope with.’

‘No,’ answered the patient doggedly; ‘I told you I would have no stranger come to stare at me. Cure me if you can, and if you can’t, leave it alone. I have little faith in medicine. I contrived to live sixty-five years without it, and the experience I have had of it in the sixty-sixth year has not been calculated to strengthen my belief in its efficacy.’

‘Did you finish that last bottle of medicine?’

‘No, there is a dose left.’

‘Then I’ll take the bottle home with me,’ said Lucius, selecting the bottle from among two or three empty phials on the mantelshelf, ‘and make another change in your medicine.’

‘It seems to me that you chop and change a good deal,’ said the patient testily. ‘But why take that bottle? You must know what you gave me.’

‘I am not quite clear about it,’ answered Lucius, after a moment’s hesitation; ‘I may as well put the bottle in my pocket.’

‘Do as you like. But don’t forget that I want an hour’s talk with you this evening.’

‘You had better defer that till you are stronger.’

‘That time may never come. No, I will defer nothing. What I have to say to you is of no small importance. It concerns your own interests, and I recommend you to hear it to-night.’



‘I cannot consent to discuss any subject which may agitate you as you were agitated last night,’ said Lucius firmly.

‘This other subject will not agitate me. I can promise that.’

‘On that condition I will hear whatever you may have to say.’

‘Good. You will find it to your own advantage to obey me. Be with me at the same hour as you were last night.’

‘I will. But as you are a trifle weaker to-day than you were yesterday, I should recommend you not to get up, except for an hour in the middle of the day, while your bed is being made.’

‘Very well.’

Lucius left him, and in the corridor found himself face to face with Mrs. Wincher.

‘She has been listening, I daresay,’ he thought, having made up his mind that these Winchers were of the scorpion breed, and their long years of fidelity only a sham. ‘After all, dishonesty is only a matter of opportunity, and the domestic traitor must bide his time to betray.’

Mrs. Wincher’s manner and bearing were curiously changed since Lucius had last seen her. She no longer flung her head aloft; she no longer re-

garded him with looks of scorn. Her present air was that of extreme meekness; he thought he beheld traces of shame and contrition in her visage.

‘How do you find master this morning, sir?’ she asked.

‘Worse,’ Lucius answered shortly.

‘Dear, dear! that’s bad! And I’m sure it isn’t for want of care. I’m sure the beef-tea that I gave him used to be a jelly—that firm as you could cut it with a knife—though Miss Lucille did take the making of it out of my hands.’

‘Miss Sivewright is naturally anxious about her grandfather,’ answered Lucius coldly, ‘and I am very anxious too.’

He was about to pass Mrs. Wincher, without farther parley, when she stopped him.

‘O, if you please, Dr. Davory,’ she said meekly, ‘would you be kind enough to let my good gentleman have a few words with you? The fact is, he’s got somethink on his mind, and he’d feel more comfortable if he ast your advice. I didn’t know nothink about it till five minutes ago, though I could see at breakfast-time as he was low-spirited and had no happetite for his resher; but I thought that was along of master being so bad. Howsumdever, five minutes ago he ups and tells me all about it, and

says he, "If I tell Dr. Davory, I shall feel more comfortable like," he says. So I says I'd ast you to have a few words with him.'

'Where is he?' asked Lucius, his suspicions increased by this singular application.

'In the room where the bricklebrack is kep', answered Mrs. Wincher. 'He's been dustin' as usual, and he said he'd take the liberty to wait there for you.'

'Very well; I'll go and hear what he has to say.'

Lucius went down-stairs to the large room with its multifarious contents—the room which held the chief part of Mr. Sivewright's collection.

Here he found Mr. Wincher, moving about feebly with a dusting brush in his hand.

'Well, Mr. Wincher, what's the matter with you this morning?' asked Lucius. 'Do you want to consult me professionally?'

'No, sir. It isn't anything that way,' answered the old man, who was somewhat his wife's superior in education, but infinitely less able to hold his own conversationally, such intellectual powers as he may have originally possessed having run to seed during his long dull life, and the only remaining brightness being that feeble glimmer which still illumined the

regions of art. He would swear to an old master's handling—could tell a Memling from a Van Eyck—or an Ostade from a Jan Steen—knew every mark to be found on old china or delf, from the earliest specimens of Rouen ware to the latest marvels of Sèvres, from the clumsiest example of Battersea to the richest purple and gilding of Worcester. But beyond the realms of art the flame of Jacob Wincher's intellect was dim as a farthing rushlight.

‘I've had a shock this morning, sir,’ he said.

‘Some kind of fit, do you mean?’ asked Lucius. ‘You said you didn't want to consult me professionally.’

‘No more I do, sir. The shock I'm talking about wasn't bodily, but mental. I've made a dreadful discovery, Mr. Davoren. This house has been robbed.’

‘I'm not surprised to hear it,’ said Lucius sternly.

He thought he saw which way matters were drifting. This old man was cunning enough to be the first to give the alarm. Lucius's incautious remarks to Mrs. Wincher had put her husband upon his guard, and he was now going to play the comedy of innocence.

‘Not surprised to hear it, sir?’ he echoed, staring aghast at Lucius.

‘No, Mr. Wincher. And I am sure that no one knows more about it than you do.’

‘Lord save us, sir! what do you mean?’

‘Let me hear your story, sir,’ answered Lucius, ‘and then I’ll tell you what I mean.’

‘But for Heaven’s sake, Mr. Davoren, tell me you don’t suspect me of any hand in the robbery!’ cried the old man piteously—‘I, that have lived five-and-twenty years with Mr. Sivewright, and had the care of everything that belonged to him all that time!’

‘A man may wait five-and-twenty years for a good opportunity,’ said Lucius coolly. ‘Don’t trouble yourself to be tragical, Mr. Wincher, but say what you have to say, and be quick about it. I tell you again that I am in no manner surprised to hear this house has been robbed. It was no doubt robbed last night, and perhaps many nights before. But I tell you frankly, that I intend to take measures to prevent this house being robbed again; even if those measures should include putting you and your good lady upon the outside of it.’

‘Lord have mercy upon us!’ cried Jacob Wincher, wringing his hands. ‘You are a great deal too hard upon me, sir. You’ll be sorry for it when you find out how unjust you’ve been.’

‘I promise to be sorry,’ answered Lucius, ‘when

I *do* make that discovery. Now, Mr. Wincher, be explicit, if you please.'

But Jacob Wincher declared that he was all of a tremble, and had to sit down upon an ancient choir-stall, and wipe the perspiration from his forehead before he was able to proceed.

Lucius waited patiently for the old man to recover his self-possession, but in no manner relaxed the severity of his countenance. In all this agitation, in this pretended desire to confide in him, he saw only a clever piece of acting.

'Well, Mr. Wincher,' he said, as the old servant mopped his forehead with a blue cotton handkerchief, 'how about this robbery?'

'I'm coming to it, sir. But you've given me such a turn with what you said just now. God knows how cruel and how uncalled for those words of yours were.'

'Pray proceed, Mr. Wincher.'

'Well, sir, you must know there's a deal of property about this place, perhaps a good deal more than you've ever seen, though our old master seemed to take to you from the first, and has been more confidential with you than he ever was with any one else. Now there's a good deal of the property that isn't portable, and there's some that is — china, for in-

stance ; little bits of tea-cups and saucers that are worth more than you'd be willing to believe ; and silver—'

'Silver !' exclaimed Lucius, astonished.

'Yes, sir. You didn't know of that, perhaps. Among the things master collected after he retired from business—and he was always collecting something, as long as he could get about among the brokers, and in all the courts and alleys in London—there was a good bit of old silver. Five Queen Anne teapots ; three Oliver Cromwell tankards, not very much to look at unless you were up to that sort of thing, but worth their weight in gold, Mr. Sivewright used to say to me. "I wish I was rich enough to do more in old silver," he has said many a time. "There's nothing like it. Collectors are waking up to the value of it, and before many years are over old silver will be almost as precious as diamonds." He picked up a good many nice little bits first and last, through rummaging about among old chaps that dealt in second-hand stuff of that sort, and didn't trouble to ask any awkward questions of the people that brought 'em the goods ; picked up things that would have gone into the melting-pot very likely, if his eye hadn't been quick enough to see their value. One day he'd bring home a set of spindle-legged salt-cellars ; another time a battered old rose-water dish. Once he bought



a "monstrance" which had been used upon some cathedral altar, once upon a time—solid gold set with rubies and emeralds. "The fool that I bought it from took it for ormolu," he said.'

'And these are the things that are gone, I suppose,' said Lucius, somewhat puzzled by the old man's loquacity. Why should Wincher inform him of the existence of these things if he were an accomplice of the thief? Yet this seeming candour was doubtless a part of the traitor's scheme.

'Every one of 'em, sir. There's been a clean sweep made of 'em. But how any thief could find out where they were kept is more than I can fathom. It's too much for my poor old brains.'

'The thief was well informed, depend upon it, Mr. Wincher,' answered Lucius. 'And pray, whereabouts did you keep this old silver?'

'Would you like to see, sir?'

'I should.'

'I'll show you the place, then.'

Jacob Wincher led the way to the extreme end of the repository, where behind a tall screen of old oak panelling there was a massive muniment chest furnished with a lock which seemed calculated to defy the whole race of burglars and pick-locks.

The old servant took a key from his pocket—a

small key, for the lock was of modern make—unlocked and opened the chest. There was nothing in it except an old damask curtain.

‘The silver was rolled up in that curtain,’ said Jacob Wincher, taking up the curtain and shaking it vigorously, as if with some faint hope that the Queen Anne teapots would fall out of its folds, like the rabbits or live pigeons in a conjurer’s trick. ‘The iron safe was a landlord’s fixture in Bondstreet, and we were obliged to leave it behind us, so this chest was the safest place I could find to put the silver in; in fact, master told me to put it there.’

‘I see,’ thought Lucius; ‘the old scoundrel is telling me this story in advance of the time when his master will inevitably ask for the silver. This seeming candour is the depth of hypocrisy.’

Jacob Wincher stood staring at the empty chest in apathetic hopelessness, feebly rubbing his chin, whereon some grizzled tufts lingered.

‘Do you mean to tell me,’ said Lucius, ‘that this chest was locked, and that you had the key of it in your pocket, at the time of the robbery?’

‘Yes, sir. The chest has never been left unlocked for five minutes since that silver has been in my care; and I have never slept without this key being under my pillow.’

‘And you would have me believe that a stranger could hit upon the precise spot where the silver was kept, amidst this inextricable tangle of property, open the box without doing any damage to the lock, and walk off with his booty without your knowing anything of his entrance or exit?’

‘It seems strange, doesn’t it, Mr. Davoren?’

‘It seems more than strange, Mr. Wincher. It seems—and it is—incredible.’

‘And yet, sir, the thing has been done. The question is, was it done by a stranger?’

‘Yes, Mr. Wincher, that is the question; and it is a question which, to my mind, suggests only one answer.’

‘You mean that I am telling you lies, sir? that it was my hand which stole those things?’ cried the old man.

‘To be plain with you, that is precisely my idea.’

‘You are doing me a great wrong, sir. I have served my master faithfully for so many years that I ought to be above suspicion. I have not much longer to remain in this world, and I would rather die of want to-morrow than lengthen my days by a dishonest action. However, if you choose to suspect me, there is an end of the matter, and it is useless for me to say any more.’

There was a quiet dignity about the old man's air as he said this that impressed Lucius. Was it not just possible that he had done wrong in jumping at conclusions about these Winchers? The police, who are apt to jump at conclusions, are just as apt to be wrong. But if these people were not guilty, who else could have opened the door to that midnight intruder? There was no one else.

'Come, Mr. Wincher,' he said, 'I have good reason for my suspicion. I saw a man admitted into this house, by one of the back doors, between one and two o'clock this morning. You, or your wife, must have opened the door to that man.'

'As there is a heaven above us, sir, I never stirred from my bed after half-past eleven o'clock last night.'

'Your wife must have admitted him, then.'

'Impossible, sir!'

'I tell you I saw the man creep from the barges to the garden; I saw the door opened,' said Lucius; and then went on to describe that midnight watch of his minutely.

The old man stared at him in sheer bewilderment.

'A stranger admitted!' he repeated. 'But by whom? by whom?'

'Had I not seen the light as the door opened, I

might have thought that the man opened the door for himself,' said Lucius.

'That would have been equally impossible. I looked to all the fastenings myself the last thing. The doors were locked and barred, and those old-fashioned iron bars are no trifling defence.'

Lucius, too, was bewildered. Could Mr. Sivewright himself have disposed of this property? In so eccentric a man nothing need be surprising. Could he have crept down-stairs in the dead of the night to admit some dealer, disposed of his property, dismissed the man, and crept stealthily back to his bed? No, that was too wild a fancy. Despite of his eccentricities, Mr. Sivewright had plenty of common sense, and such a proceeding as that would have been the act of a madman.

'Supposing any stranger to have obtained admittance to the house,' said Lucius, after an interval of perplexed thought, 'how could he have opened that chest without your key?'

'A stranger could not possibly have done it,' said Wincher, with a stress upon the word 'stranger.'

'Who else, then?'

'There is one who could have opened that chest easy enough, or any other lock in the place, suppos-

ing him to be alive ; but I make no doubt he's dead and gone ever so long ago.'

'Whom do you mean?'

'Mr. Ferdinand, my master's son.'

Lucius gave a slight start at the sound of that unwelcome name, of all sounds the most hateful to his ear. 'Then he—Ferdinand Sivewright—had a duplicate key, I suppose?'

'Yes, of most things about the place in Bondstreet, except the iron safe : he never could get at that till he drugged his father, and stole the key out of his pocket while he was asleep. But other things, that were pretty easy to get at, he did get at, and robbed his father up hill and down dale, as the saying is. O, he was a thorough-paced scoundrel, though I'm sorry to say it, as he was our young missy's father.'

'He had a duplicate key to that chest, you say?'

'Yes. He was that artful there was no being up to him. We used to keep old china in that chest—Battersea and Chelsea and Worcester and Derby—valuable little bits of the English school, which fetch higher prices than anything foreign nowadays. All of a sudden, soon after he came to be partner with his father—for the old man doated upon him, and would have made any sacrifice to please him—I found

out that the specimens in the muniment chest were dwindling somehow. One day I missed a cup and saucer, and another day a soup-basin and cover, and so on. At first I thought I must be mistaken—my own catalogue was wrong, perhaps—but by and by I saw the things visibly melting, as you may say, and I told my master. He told Mr. Ferdinand about it; but bless your heart, Mr. Ferdinand brings out the day-book with the sale of those very goods entered as neatly as possible, some under one date, and some under another. “I never remember taking the money for those things, Ferdinand,” said my master; but Mr. Ferdinand stood him out that he’d had the money all correct, and master believed him, or pretended to believe him, I hardly know which. And so things went on. Sometimes it was in small things, sometimes in large; but in every way that a son could plunder his father, Ferdinand Sivewright plundered my master. It was quite by accident I found out about his having the duplicate key. He came to the desk where I was writing one day and asked me to give him change for a sovereign, and in taking the money out of his waistcoat-pocket in his quick impatient way he tumbles out a lot of other things—a pencil-case, a penknife, and a key. I knew that key at a glance; it’s a peculiar-looking



one, as you see. "That's a curious little key, Mr. Ferdinand," said I, picking it up and looking at it before he could stop me. "Yes," he said, taking it out of my hand before I'd had time to examine it very closely, and putting it back in his pocket, "it's a key that belonged to my poor mother's jewel-case. No use to me; but I keep it for her sake." Well, sir, I told Mr. Sivewright about that key, but he only sighed in that downhearted way which was common enough with him in those days. He didn't seem surprised, and indeed I think he'd come to know his son's ways pretty well by this time. "Say nothing about it, Wincher," he said to me, "you may be mistaken after all. In any case you needn't keep anything valuable in the chest in future. If my only son is a thief, we won't put temptation in his way."

'Hard upon the father,' said Lucius. 'But this throws no light upon the disappearance of those things. What do you consider their value?'

'As old silver the plate may be worth about forty pounds, as specimens of art at least three hundred. The monstrance is worth much more.'

'Humph, and I suppose a thief would be likely to sell them immediately as old silver.'

'Yes; unless he were a very artful dodger, and knew where to find a good market for them, he'd be

likely to sell them without an hour's delay to be melted down.'

'When did you last see the things safe in that chest?' asked Lucius.

'About ten days ago. I haven't much to do, you see, sir, except grub about amongst the collection; and I'm in the habit of looking over the things pretty often, and comparing them with my catalogue, to see that all's right.'

'And you never missed anything before?'

'Never so much as a cracked teacup among what I call the rubbishing lots. Heaven only knows how that chest could have been emptied. Even if Ferdinand Sivewright were in the land of the living, which is hardly likely—for if he'd been alive he'd have come and tried to get money out of his poor old father before this—he couldn't get into this house unless some one let him in.'

'No, not unless some one let him in,' repeated Lucius thoughtfully. He had begun to think Jacob Wincher was perhaps, after all, an honest man. But to believe this was to make the mystery darker than the darkest night. His ideas were all at sea, drifting which way he knew not.

'Ferdinand Sivewright is dead,' he said presently. 'He will never trouble his father again.'

‘How do you know that, sir?’ asked Wincher eagerly.

‘Never mind how. I do know it, and that is enough. Now, Wincher, there’s no use in talking of this business any more, except in a practical manner. If you’re as innocent of any hand in the robbery as you pretend to be, you won’t shrink from inquiry.’

‘I do not shrink from inquiry, sir. If I did I shouldn’t have told you of the robbery.’

‘That might be a profound artifice, since the disappearance of these things must have been found out sooner or later.’

‘If I had been the thief I should have tried to stave off the discovery as long as I could,’ answered Jacob Wincher. ‘However, I don’t want to argue; the truth is the truth, that is enough for me.’

‘Very well, Mr. Wincher. What we have to do is to try and recover these missing articles. Unless the silver is melted down it ought to be easily traced. And the monstrance would be still more easily traced, I should think.’

‘That would depend upon circumstances, sir. Depend upon it, if the things were taken by a thief who knows their value, and knows the best market for them, he’ll send them abroad.’

‘They may be traced even abroad. What we have

to do is to put the case at once into the best hands. I shall go straight from here to a detective officer, whom I've had some dealings with already, and get his advice. Now, is there much more property amongst the collection valuable enough to tempt a thief, and sufficiently portable for him to carry away ?'

'There is a great deal of china, small pieces, quite as valuable as the silver—not, perhaps, quite so easy to carry, but very nearly so.'

'Then we must have the inside of this house guarded to-night.'

'I can sit up here all night and keep watch.'

'You would be no match for the thief, even if he came alone, which we are not certain he would. No, my dear Mr. Wincher, I will engage a properly qualified watchman ; but remember, not one word of this to Miss Sivewright—or to your wife, who might be tempted to tell her young mistress.'

'Very well, sir. I know how to hold my tongue. I'd be the last to go and frighten missy. But how about my old master ? Is he to know ?'

'Not on any account. In his present weak state any violent agitation might be fatal, and we know that collecting these things has been the ruling passion of his life. To tell him that he is being robbed of these things might be to give him his death-blow.'

‘Very well, sir. I’ll obey orders.’

‘Good; and if I have wronged you, Mr. Wincher, by a groundless suspicion, you must pardon me. You will allow that appearances are somewhat against you.’

‘They are, sir, they are!’ answered the old man despondently.

‘However, time will show. I will send my watchman in at dusk. You could let him in at the back door, couldn’t you, without Miss Sivewright knowing anything about it?’

‘I could, sir. There’s a little door opening into the brewhouse, which opens out of the boothouse, as you may know.’

‘No, indeed! I know there are a lot of outbuildings, room enough to lodge a regiment; but I have never taken any particular notice of them.’

‘It’s a curious old place, Mr. Davoren, and goodness knows what it could have been used for in days gone by, unless it was for hiding folks away for no good. Perhaps you’d like to see the door I mean.’

‘I should,’ replied Lucius, ‘in order that I may explain its situation to the policeman.’

‘Come along with me then, sir, and I’ll show it you.’

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE HIDDEN STAIRCASE.

LUCIUS had a keen desire to explore those premises at the back of Cedar House, with a vague notion that his examination of them might throw some light upon the mystery which now filled his mind.

If these Winchers were indeed innocent, which the old man's manner and conduct inclined him to believe they must be, who was the guilty one? In that house—with the exception of its master, who in his feebleness counted for nothing—there were but three persons, Mr. and Mrs. Wincher and Lucille. One of those three must have opened the door last night; one of those three must have placed that candle in the upper window—the candle which was evidently meant for a signal.

Lucille! Was reason deserting him? Was this perplexity of mind verging upon madness, when *her* name would suggest itself in connection with that secret admittance of the stranger, and that theft

which was no doubt its direct consequence? Lucille, that gentle and innocent girl! What had she to do with the solution of this dark enigma?

The mere thought of her in connection with this nefarious business tortured him. Yet the idea, once having occurred to him, was not easily to be dismissed.

He remembered all the stories of secret crime that he had heard and read of, some stories involving creatures as seemingly innocent and as fair as Lucille Sivewright. He recalled his own professional experience, which had shown him much of life's darker side. He remembered with a shudder the infinite hypocrisy, the hidden sins, of women in all outward semblance as pure and womanly as the girl he loved.

What if Lucille inherited the fatal taint of her father's infamy? What if in this fair young girl there lurked some hidden drops of that poison which corrupted the parent's soul? Could an evil tree produce good fruit? Could grapes come of thistles? The very Scripture was against his fond belief in Lucille Sivewright's goodness. Could such a father give life to a pure and innocent child?

This doubt, once having entered into his mind, lingered there in spite of him. His heart was racked



by the odious thought, yet he could not dismiss it. He followed Mr. Wincher to inspect the back part of the house in a very absent-minded condition; but the practical side of his character soon got the upper hand as the investigation proceeded, and he was alert to make any discovery that might be made from the position of doors and windows.

In his evening walks with Lucille in the barren old garden he had always come out of the house by a glass door opening out of a long-disused back parlour, in which there were only a few wooden cases, which might for aught Lucius knew be full or empty. Jacob Wincher now led him into the kitchen, a spacious chamber, with a barn-like roof open to the rafters, showing the massive timbers with which the house was built. From the kitchen they descended three shallow steps into a vault-like scullery, out of which, ghastly in their dark emptiness, opened various cellars. Lucius peered into one of them, and saw that a flight of steep stairs led down into a black abyss.

‘Bring a light,’ he said; ‘the man may be hiding in one of these cellars. We’d better explore them all. But first let us lock the doors, and cut off his chances of escape.’

He suited the action to the word, and locked the

door leading to the kitchen, and thence to the interior of the house.

‘Where do you and your wife sleep?’ he asked Mr. Wincher.

‘In a little room off the kitchen. It was built for a storeroom, I believe, and there’s shelves all round. My good lady keeps our Sunday clothes on them, and our little bit of tea and sugar and such-like, for we board ourselves.’

‘One would think you must hear any one passing through the kitchen at night, when the house is quiet,’ said Lucius meditatively.

‘I don’t feel so sure of that, sir. We’re pretty hard sleepers both of us; we’re on the trot all day, you see, and are very near worn out by the time we get to bed.’

‘Strange,’ said Lucius. ‘I should have thought you must have heard footsteps in the next room to that you sleep in.’

Jacob Wincher made no farther attempt to justify his hard sleeping, but led the way to the boothouse, a small and darksome chamber, chiefly tenanted by members of the beetle tribe, who apparently found sufficient aliment in the loose plaster that fell from the mildew-stained walls. Thence they proceeded to the brewery, which was almost as large as the kitchen,

and boasted a huge copper, and a still huger chimney-shaft open to the sky. There were three doors in this place—one narrow and low, opening to an obscure corner of the garden; a second belonging to a spacious cupboard, which may have been used for wood in days gone by; and the third a mysterious little door in an angle.

‘What does that belong to?’ asked Lucius, pointing to this unknown door, after examining the one leading to the garden, which was securely locked and barred, and, according to Mr. Wincher’s account, was very rarely unfastened. ‘That door yonder in the corner,’ he asked again, as the old man hesitated. ‘Where does that lead?’

‘I can’t say as I know very well,’ answered Jacob Wincher dubiously. ‘There’s a kind of a staircase leads up somewhere—to a loft, I suppose.’

‘Why, man alive,’ cried Lucius, ‘do you mean to tell me that you have lived all these years in this house and that there is a staircase in it which leads you don’t know where?’

‘You can’t hardly call it a staircase, sir,’ answered the other apologetically; ‘it’s very little more than a ladder.’

‘Ladder or staircase, you mean to say you don’t know where it leads?’

‘No, sir. I’m not particular strong in my legs, and there’s a great deal more room than we want in this house without poking into holes and corners; so I never troubled about it.’

‘Indeed, Mr. Wincher; now I am more curious than you, and I propose that before examining the cellars we find out where this staircase leads.’

‘I’m agreeable, sir.’

‘You talk about a loft; but the roof of this brewhouse shows that there can be nothing above it.’

‘Very true, sir.’

‘And the kitchen is built in the same way?’

‘Yes, sir. But there’s the boothouse. I took it for granted that staircase led to a loft or a garret over that.’

‘Can you see nothing from outside?’

‘Nothing, except the sloping roof.’

Lucius opened the door in the angle, and beheld a curious cramped little staircase, which, as Jacob Wincher had told him, was verily little better than a ladder. It was by no means an inviting staircase, bearing upon it the dust and cobwebs of ages, and leading to profound darkness. To the timid mind it was eminently suggestive of vermin and noxious insects. But Lucius, who was determined to discover

the ins and outs of this curious old house, ascended the feeble creaking steps boldly enough.

The stairs were steep, but not many. On reaching the topmost, Lucius found himself, not in a room as he had expected, but in a passage so narrow that his coatsleeves brushed against the wall on either side. This passage was perfectly dark, and had a damp mouldy odour. It was low, for he could touch the roughly-plastered ceiling with his hand. He went on, treading cautiously, lest he should come to a gap in the rotten flooring, which might precipitate him incontinently to the lowest depth of some dark cellar. The passage was long; he stumbled presently against a step, mounted three or four stairs, and went on some few yards farther on the higher level, and then found himself at the foot of another staircase, which, unlike the one below, wound upwards in spiral fashion, and demanded extreme caution from the stranger who trod its precipitous steps.

This Lucius mounted slowly, feeling his way. After the first step or two he saw a faint glimmer of light, which seemed to creep in at some chink above. This got stronger as he ascended, and presently he perceived that it came from a crack in a panelled wall. Another step brought him to a small

chamber, not much larger than a roomy closet. He felt the wall that faced him, and discovered bolts, which seemed to fasten a door, or it might be a sliding panel in the wall.

Scarcely had he done this when he was startled by a sound which was very familiar to him—Mr. Sivewright's sharp short cough.

He drew back amazed. This secret staircase—or if not exactly a secret staircase, at least one which nobody had taken the trouble to explore—had led him directly to Mr. Sivewright's room.

He waited for a few minutes, heard the old man sigh as he turned wearily in his bed, heard the crackle of a newspaper presently as he turned the leaf, and convinced himself of the fact that this closet communicated with Homer Sivewright's room. Whether its existence were known to Mr. Sivewright or not was a question which he must settle for himself as best he might.

He went back as noiselessly as he had come, and found Jacob Wincher waiting in the brewhouse, patiently seated upon a three-legged stool.

'Well, sir, you didn't find much, I suppose, to compensate for having made such a figure of your coat with plaster and cobwebs—only rubbish and such-like, I suppose?'

‘My good Mr. Wincher, I found positively nothing,’ answered Lucius. ‘But I extended my knowledge of the topography of this queer old house, and in doing that recompensed myself for my trouble. Yes,’ he added, glancing disconsolately at his coat, ‘the whitewash has not improved my appearance; and the cost of a coat is still a matter of importance to me. Now for the cellars. You are sure all means of exit are cut off?’

‘Quite sure, sir.’

‘Then we may find our thief snugly stowed away underground perhaps, with the booty upon him. Come along.’

They groped their way into the various cellars by the light of a candle, and examined their emptiness. Two out of the four had contained coals, but were now disused. The small quantities of coal which Mr. Sivewright afforded for his household were accommodated in a roomy closet in the kitchen. The remaining two had contained wine, and a regiment of empty bottles still remained, the fragile memorials of departed plenty. They found beetles and spiders in profusion, and crossed the pathway of a rat; but they discovered no trace of the thief.

This exploration and the previous conversation



with Jacob Wincher occupied nearly two hours. Lucius left the house without again seeing Lucille. He would have been unable to account for his occupation during those two hours without giving her fresh cause for alarm. But before going he contrived to see Mrs. Wincher, and from that matron, now perfectly placable, he received the pleasing intelligence that Lucille was fast asleep on a sofa in the parlour.

‘I brought her in a ramshackle old sofy belonging to the bricklebrack,’ said Mrs. Wincher; ‘Lewis Katorse, my good gentleman calls it. And she laid down when I persuaded her, and went off just like a child that’s worn out with being on the trot all day. But she does look so sad and worried-like in her sleep, poor dear, it goes to my heart to see her.’

‘Sad and worried,’ thought Lucius; and he had added to her anxieties by arousing her childish fears of an unknown danger. And then at the very time when she was broken down altogether by trouble and grief, had taken it into his head to suspect her. He hated himself for those shameful doubts which had tortured him a little while before.

‘Come what may,’ he said to himself, ‘let events take what shape they will, I will never again suspect

her. Though I had forged the chain of evidence link by link, and it led straight to her, I would believe that facts were lies rather than think her guilty.'

## CHAPTER VIII.

### MR. OTRANTO PRONOUNCES AN OPINION.

FROM Cedar House Lucius went straight to Mr. Otranto's office. It was still early, not yet noon, and he would have time for his daily round after he had settled this business, which was uppermost in his mind.

'Well,' he said, after a brief good-morning to the detective, 'any news from Rio?'

'Some, but not much,' answered Mr. Otranto, looking up from the desk, at which he had been copying some document into a note-book. 'The mail's just in. I was going to write you a letter in the course of to-day or to-morrow. This Mr. Ferdinand Sivewright seems to have been altogether a bad lot—card-sharper, swindler, anything you like. He soon made Rio too hot to hold him, and after managing to rub on there about six months, went on to Mexico. My agent hunted up any information about him that was to be got in Mexico; but it's a

long time ago, you see, since he was there. He seems to have behaved pretty much the same in Mexico as he did in Rio, and that's about all my agent could hear. The impression was that he had left Mexico on the quiet—taken French leave, as you may say—and come back to England; but he couldn't find out the name of the vessel he sailed in.'

'You needn't take any farther trouble about the matter, Mr. Otranto,' said Lucius. 'I believe I have found the missing links in the man's history. My business to-day is of a different kind.'

He went on to explain the state of affairs at Cedar House. Mr. Otranto shook his head doubtfully.

'I think you ought to put this into the hands of the regular police,' he said; 'my line is private inquiry. This is rather out of my way.'

'But it isn't out of your old way, Mr. Otranto, when you belonged to the regular police. If I were to go to the police-station they'd send a loud-talking noisy man to examine the premises, and frighten the invalid gentleman I've been telling you about. I want the property recovered, if possible, and the place closely watched; but I want the thing done quietly, and I'd rather trust it in your hands than make a police-case of it.'

‘Very well, sir; I’ll do my best. I’ll send a quiet hand round to Cedar House at nine o’clock to-night.’

‘Good; but he must come in at the back. I’ll have some one on the watch for him at nine. I’d better write my directions as to the way he must come. The young lady’s sitting-room is in the front of the house; so he mustn’t come in that way, for fear she should see him.’

Lucius wrote his instructions for the detective. He was to come from the barges to the garden, as the thief had come, and he would see a door ajar, and a light burning in one of the outbuildings. This was the door by which he was to enter.

‘And now, sir, for a description of the property,’ said Mr. Otranto, ‘if you want me to trace it.’

‘A description?’

‘Yes to be sure. I can do nothing without that.’

‘I never thought of that,’ replied Lucius, feeling himself a poor creature when face to face with this practical far-seeing detective; ‘you will want a description of course. I only know that there are Queen-Anne teapots, Cromwell tankards—’

‘Queen Anne be hanged!’ exclaimed the detective contemptuously.

‘Some curious old saltcellars, and a monst’rance.’

‘What in the name of wonder is that?’ cried the detective. ‘I’ll tell you what it is, sir, I must have a detailed description before I can move a peg. I daresay the property is out of the country by this time, if it isn’t in the melting-pot.’

‘A thief who took the trouble to rob Mr. Sive-wright would most likely have some idea what he was stealing,’ answered Lucius, ‘and would hardly take rare old silver to the melting-pot. I’ll tell you what I’ll do, Mr. Otranto; I’ll bring the old servant round here this afternoon, and you shall have the description from him. In cross-questioning him about the robbery you might, perhaps, arrive at some conclusion as to whether he had any hand in it.’

‘I might, perhaps,’ retorted Mr. Otranto, with ineffable contempt; ‘let me have half-a-dozen words with the man and I’ll soon settle that question. I never saw the man yet that was made of such opaque stuff that I couldn’t see through him.’

‘So much the better,’ said Lucius. ‘I want to find out whether this old man is a consummate hypocrite or an honest fellow. Shall you be at home at four o’clock this afternoon?’

‘I shall.’

‘Then I’ll bring him to you at that hour.’

Lucius went about his day’s work, and got

through it by half-past three, when he took a hansom cab, a rare extravagance for him, and drove to Cedar House.

He asked at once to see Mrs. Wincher's good gentleman, whereupon Jacob Wincher emerged from his retreat briskly enough, and came to the garden-gate where Lucius waited.

'You haven't heard anything of the property?' he asked eagerly.

'No. But I want you to come along with me to give a description of it.'

'To the police-station, sir?' asked Wincher, without any appearance of alarm or unwillingness.

'Never mind where. You'll find out all about it when you get there,' answered Lucius, in whose mind yet lurked suspicions as to the old servant's honesty.

The cab bore them speedily to Mr. Otranto's office, and was there dismissed. Wincher entered that cave of mystery as calmly as a lamb going to the slaughter, or indeed much more calmly than the generality of those gentle victims, which seem to have some foreboding of the doom that awaits them within.

Mr. Otranto looked up from his desk, and contemplated the old man with a critical glance, keen, swift,



searching, the glance of a connoisseur in that walk of art; as if Mr. Wincher had been a picture, and he, Mr. Otranto, were called upon to decide whether he were an original or a fraudulent copy. After that brief survey, the detective gave a somewhat contemptuous sniff; and then proceeded to elicit a description of the lost property, which Mr. Wincher gave ramblingly, and in a feebly nervous manner. To Lucius it seemed very much the manner of guilt.

Mr. Otranto asked a great many questions about the robbery, some of which seemed to Lucius puerile or even absurd. But he deferred to the superior wisdom of the trained detective.

In the course of this inquiry Mr. Otranto made himself acquainted with the numerous ins and outs of Cedar House.

‘A house built especially for the accommodation of burglars, one would suppose,’ he said; ‘there must be hiding-places enough for half the cracksmen in London. However, I think if there is any one still on the premises—or if the visitor of last night pays any farther visits—we shall catch them. I shall put on two men to-night, Mr. Davoren, instead of one—one to keep guard in the room that contains the property, the other to watch the back premises.

This business will cost money, remember—but, by Jove, we'll succeed in trapping the scoundrel !'

'Your services shall be paid for,' said Lucius, not without a pang, remembering the tenpound-note he had already given Mr. Otranto on account of the Rio inquiry, and of which there remained no balance in his favour—nay, there was more likely a balance against him.

'You can go, Mr.—Mr. What's-your-name,' said the detective carelessly ; and Jacob Wincher, thus dismissed, hobbled feebly forth to wend his way back to Cedar House ; so rare a visitant to this outer world that the clamour of the City seemed to him like the howling of fiends in Pandemonium.

'Well,' said Lucius, directly the old servant had departed, 'what do you think of that man ?'

'He isn't up to it,' answered Mr. Otranto contemptuously.

'Isn't up to what ?'

'To having act or part in that robbery. He isn't up to it,' repeated the detective, snapping his fingers with increasing contempt. 'It isn't in him. Lor bless you, Mr. Davoren, I know 'em when I see 'em. There's a brightness about their eye, a firmness about their mouth, a nerve about 'em altogether, that there's no raistaking.'

‘About a thief, I suppose you mean?’ inquired Lucius.

‘Yes, sir. I know ’em fast enough when I see ’em. There’s the stamp of intellect upon ’em, sir—with very few exceptions there’s talent in ’em to back ’em up through everything. You don’t catch *them* stammering and stuttering like that poor old chap just now. Not a bit of it. They’re as clear as crystal. They’ve got their story ready, and they tell it short and sharp and decisive, if they’re first-raters; a little too wordy, perhaps, if they’re new to their work.’

Mr. Otranto dwelt on the talent of the criminal classes with an evident satisfaction.

‘As for that poor old chap,’ he said decisively, ‘there isn’t genius enough or pluck enough in him even for the kinchin lay.’

Lucius did not pause to inquire about this particular branch of the art, whereof he was profoundly ignorant.

‘He might not have pluck enough to attempt the robbery unaided,’ he said, still persisting in the idea that Jacob Wincher must be guilty, ‘yet he might be capable of opening the door to an accomplice.’

‘He didn’t do it, sir,’ answered the detective decisively. ‘I’d have had it out of him if he had, before

you could have known what I was leading up to. I laid every trap for him that could be laid, and if he had done it he must have walked into one of 'em. I should have caught him tripping, depend upon it. But taking the question from a pischological point of view,' continued Mr. Otranto, who sometimes got hold of a fine word, and gave his own version of it, 'I tell you it isn't in his composition to do such a thing.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' said Lucius, somewhat dejectedly.

He left Mr. Otranto's office only in time to take a hasty dinner at a city eating-house, where huge rounds of boiled beef were dealt out to hungry customers in a somewhat rough-and-ready fashion. He had very little appetite for the ample and economical repast, but ate a little nevertheless, being fully aware of the evil effects of long fasting on an overworked mind and body. This brief collation dispatched, he went straight to Cedar House, to keep his appointment with Mr. Sivewright.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE MYSTERY OF LUCILLE'S PARENTAGE.

LUCIUS paused in the gray old hall, where twilight came sooner than in any other part of the house. He longed to see Lucille, to clasp the dear hand, to hear the low gentle voice; for the excitement of those few busy hours seemed to have lengthened the interval since he had last seen her. Yet he shrank with a strange nervous terror from the idea of meeting her just yet, while his mind was still agitated, still perplexed, by the mystery of last night. It was a relief to him when Mrs. Wincher told him that 'Missy' was still lying down in the parlour.

'She's been up and down stairs to give her grandpa his beef-tea, and such-like, but has laid down betwixt and between,' said Mrs. Wincher. 'She don't seem to have strength to keep up, poor child. I should think some steel-wine, now, or as much quinine-powder as would lie on a sixpence, would do her a world of good.'

‘We won’t dose her with nauseous medicines, Mrs. Wincher,’ answered Lucius; ‘she wants rest, and change of air and scene. If we could get her away from this melancholy old house, now!’

He was thinking what a relief it would be to him to withdraw her from that abode of perplexity, where danger, in some as-yet-intangible form, seemed to lurk in every shadow. If he could send her down to his sister at Stillmington! He was sure that Janet would be kind to her, and that those two would love each other. If he could but induce Lucille to go down there for a little while!

‘Well, Dr. Davory, the house is melancholic, I will not deny,’ said Mrs. Wincher, with a philosophical air. ‘My sperits are not what they was when I came here. Bond-street was so gay; and if it was but a back-kitchen I lived in, I could hear the rumb-ling of carriage-wheels going all day very lively. Of course this house is dull for a young person like Missy; but as to gettin’ her away while her grandpa’s ill, it’s more nor you, nor all the king’s hosses and all the king’s men, would do, Dr. Davory.’

‘I’m afraid you’re right,’ replied Lucius, with a sigh.

He went up to Mr. Sivewright’s room, and found his patient waiting for him, and in a somewhat rest-

less and anxious condition. The blinds were drawn, and the heavy old-fashioned shutters half-closed, excluding every ray of the afternoon sunlight. This had been Lucille's careful work, while the old man slept.

'Open those shutters and draw up the blinds!' exclaimed Mr. Sivewright impatiently. 'I don't want the darkness of the grave before my time.'

'I thought you were never coming!' he added presently, with an aggrieved air, as Lucius admitted the sunshine.

'And yet I am an hour earlier than I was yesterday.'

'The day has seemed longer than yesterday. Every day is longer than the last,' complained the old man; 'my snatches of sleep are shorter, my limbs more weary; the burden of life grows heavier as I near the end of my journey.'

'Nay, sir,' remonstrated Lucius, in a cheery tone, 'there is no need for such despondent talk as that. You are ill, and suffer the weariness of a prolonged illness, but you are in no immediate danger.'

'No immediate danger!' repeated the patient contemptuously. 'You will not admit that I am in immediate danger till you hear the death-rattle in my throat. I feel that I am on my death-bed, and



desire to do all that a dying man should do to square his account with the world he is about to leave.'

'And I hope, sir, you have some thought about that better world to which you are going,' answered Lucius seriously.

Homer Sivewright sighed, and was silent for some moments ere he replied to this remark.

'Let me settle my affairs in this world first,' he said, 'and then you may try to enlighten me about the next if you can. I have found this life so hard that it is scarcely strange if I have little hope in the life that is to come after it. But you can preach to me about that by and by. I want to talk to you about the girl who is to be your wife.'

'There is no subject so near to my heart.'

'I suppose not,' answered Mr. Sivewright, groping with a slow feeble hand under his pillow, from beneath which he presently produced a key. 'Take this key and open yonder desk, the *bonheur du jour*, and look in the third drawer on the left side.'

Lucius obeyed.

'What do you see there?'

'A packet of letters tied with green ferret, and a miniature in a morocco-case,' answered Lucius.

'Good! Now, those letters and that miniature contain the whole mystery of Lucille's birth. I have

tried many times to read the riddle, but in vain. Your sharper wits may perchance find the solution of the problem.'

'You mean as regards the identity of Lucille's mother?' asked Lucius.

'I mean as regards the identity of her father and her mother,' answered the old man. 'There have been times when I have doubted whether Lucille is a Sivewright at all—whether the girl I have called my grandchild is the daughter of my son Ferdinand.'

Lucius Davoren's heart gave a great leap. Good heavens, what a relief if it were thus—if this girl whom he so fondly loved were free from the taint of that villain's blood! For some moments he was dumb. The thought of this possible release overcame him utterly. God grant that this were but true—that the man he had slain bore no kindred to the woman who was to be his wife!

He opened the morocco-case, and looked at it with eager eyes, as if in the lifeless images it contained he might find the clue to the mystery.

The case was double, and contained two miniatures: one of a man with a weak but patrician face, the nose an elongated aquiline, the lips thin, the

chin feeble, the forehead high and pale, the eyes a light blue; the countenance of some last scion of a worn-out race; not without an expression of nobility, but utterly without force of character. The second miniature was a woman's face — pensive, tender, lovable; a face with soft black eyes, a thoughtful mouth, a low broad forehead, in which there were ample indications of intellect. The olive complexion, the darkness of the lustrous eyes, gave a foreign look to this countenance. The original might have been either French or Italian, Lucius thought, but she could hardly have been an Englishwoman.

‘What reason have you to doubt Lucille's parentage?’ he asked the old man, after a prolonged examination of those two miniatures.

‘My only reasons are contained in that packet of letters,’ answered Mr. Sivewright. ‘Those letters are the broken links in a chain which you may be able to piece together. I have puzzled over them many a time, as I told you just now, but have been able to make nothing of them.’

‘Am I to read them?’

‘Yes, read them aloud to me; I may be able to furnish you with an occasional commentary on the text.’

'First, tell me how they came into your possession.'

'That is easily done. When my son left Bond-street for the last time, after plundering my iron safe, he did not burden himself with luggage. He left all his worldly goods behind him, in the shape of a dilapidated leathern portmanteau full of old clothes. Amongst these I found that packet of letters and that miniature case, both of which he had doubtless forgotten. Now you know just as much about them as I do.'

Lucius untied the string. There were about a dozen letters; some in a woman's hand, fine, delicate, and essentially un-English; the others in a masculine caligraphy, by no means too legible. The first was directed to Ferdinand Sivewright, at a post-office in Oxford-street, but bore neither the date nor the address of the writer. This was in the man's hand, written upon the paper of a fashionable club, and ran thus:

'Thanks, my dear Sivewright, for your last. You are indeed a friend, and worth all my aristocratic acquaintance, who pretend the warmest friendship, but would not go half-a-dozen paces out of their way to save me from hanging. You, by your

prompt assistance, have rescued me from the greatest difficulty in which my imprudence — and I have always been the most imprudent of men — ever involved me. Thank Heaven and your tact, the danger is over, and I think I now stand secure of the old gentleman's favour. Did he know the truth, or but a scintillation of the truth, I should inevitably lose all chance of that future prosperity which will, I trust, enable me a few years hence to give you some substantial proof of my gratitude.

‘By the way, you talk of being hard up in the present. I regret to say, my dear fellow, that at this moment it is out of my power to help you with a stiver. Not that I for an instant ignore the obligation to provide for your small charge, but because just now I am entirely cleaned out. A few weeks hence I shall be no doubt able to send you a cheque. In the mean time your household is a prosperous one, and the cost your kindness to me may occasion is one that can scarcely be felt. You understand. How fares your little girl? I shall always be glad to hear. Madame D—— writes to me for news; so pray keep me *au courant*, that I may set her anxious mind at rest. O, Sivewright, how I languish for an end of all my secrets and perplexities, and for a happy union with her I love!

This waiting for dead men's shoes is a weary business, and makes me feel the most despicable of mankind.—Yours ever,  
H. G.'

'What do you make of that letter?' asked Mr. Sivewright.

'I can hardly tell what to make of it at present. Your son must have been of some vital service to the writer, but what the nature of that friendly act is more than I can guess.'

'You will understand it better when you have read the rest of the letters. Now, I have sometimes thought that the writer of those lines was the father of Lucille.'

'On what ground?' asked Lucius. 'He distinctly says, "How fares *your* little girl?"'

'That might be inspired by caution. Do you observe what he says about Madame D—— and her anxiety to hear of the child's welfare? Rely upon it that Madame D—— was the mother. Then there is the mention of a happy union with the woman he loves, deferred until the death of some wealthy relation. Then what do you make of the lines in which he avows his obligation to provide for "your small charge"? That small charge was the child, and on whom would there be such an

obligation except upon the father? This is how I have sometimes been inclined to read the riddle.'

'You think, then, that Lucille was the child of some secret marriage?' said Lucius; 'or of an intrigue?' he added reluctantly.

'Of a secret marriage most likely,' answered the old man. 'Had it been only an intrigue, there would hardly have been need for such excessive caution. You will see in one of the later letters how this man who signs himself "H. G." speaks of his total ruin should his secret be discovered. But go on, the letters are numbered. I arranged and numbered them with a good deal of care. Go on to number 2.'

Lucius obeyed. The second epistle was in the same hand as the first, but the formation of the characters showed that it had been written in haste and profound agitation :

'Dear Sivewright,—I enclose a cheque for 50*l*. It leaves me a beggar; but anything is better than the alternative. Your threat to trade upon my secret has thrown me into an agony of apprehension. O, Sivewright, you could surely never be such a villain! You who pretended to be my bosom friend—you who have so often enriched yourself at my expense, when



fortune and your superior skill favoured your chances at the card-table—could never be so base as to betray me! When you took upon yourself the charge which you now assert perpetually as a claim, pressing and harassing me to death with your demands for money, I deemed that friendship alone actuated you. Is it possible that you looked at the matter from the first with a trader's spirit, and only considered how much you might be able to make out of me?

'As you claim to be a gentleman, I conjure you to write and assure me that your threat of communicating with my uncle was only an idle menace; that you will keep my secret, as a gentleman should keep the secret of his friend.

'Bear in mind that to betray me would be to ruin me most completely, and to destroy your own chance of future benefit from my fortune.

'How is the little girl? Why do you not write to me at length about her? Why do your letters contain only demands for money? Madame D—— is full of anxiety, and I can say so little to satisfy her. How is the little thing? Is she well—is she happy? Does she pine for her last home, and the people who nursed her? For heaven's sake reply, and fully.—Yours,

H. G.'

‘Are those like a man’s inquiries about another man’s child?’ asked Mr. Sivewright.

‘Scarcely,’ replied Lucius. ‘I believe you are right, and that Lucille is of no kin to your son.’

‘And of no kin to me. You are glad of that, I suppose,’ said the old man with a touch of bitterness.

‘Forgive me if I confess that I shall be glad if I find she is not the child of your son.’

‘You are right. Can an evil tree bear good fruit? That seems a hard saying, but I can’t wonder you shrink from the idea of owning Ferdinand Sivewright for your children’s grandfather. Yet this H. G. may have been no better man.’

‘I can hardly think that. There is some indication of good feeling in his letters. He was most likely the dupe and victim—’

‘Of my son? Yes, I can believe that. Go on, Lucius. The third letter is from the lady, who, you will see, signs herself by her Christian name only, but gives her full address.’

‘That must afford some clue to the mystery,’ said Lucius.

‘Yes, for any one who will take the trouble to follow so slight a clue. I have never attempted the task. To accomplish it might have been to lose the

only creature that loved me. You will call this selfish policy, no doubt. Lucille's interests ought to have weighed with me more than my own. I can only answer, that old age is selfish. When a man has but a few years between him and the grave, he may well shrink from the idea of making those years desolate.'

'I do not wonder that you feared to lose her,' said Lucius.

He opened the letter numbered 3. It was in that delicate foreign hand, on thin paper.

'Rue Jeanne d'Arques, numéro 17, Rouen.

'Dear Sir,—Not having received a satisfactory response from Mr. G., I venture to address you, believing that you will compassionate my anxieties. I wish to hear more of your charge. Is she well? is she happy? O, sir, have pity upon the heart which pines for her—to which this enforced separation is a living death! Does she grow? does she remember me, and ask for me? Yet, considering her tender age at the time of our parting, that is hardly possible. I ought to be thankful that it is so—that she will not suffer any of the pangs which rend my sorrowful heart. But in spite of that thought, it grieves me to know that she will lose all memory of my face, all

love for me. It is a hard trial; and it may last for years. Heaven knows if I shall live to see the end of it.

‘I entreat you, sir, to pity one who is most grateful for your friendly help at a time when it was needed, and to let me have a full account of the little girl.

‘I am quite content to submit to Mr. G.’s desire that, for the next few years of her life, she shall have no friends but those she has in your house; yet I can but think that, at her age, residence in a London house, and above all a house of business, must be harmful. I should be very glad could you make some arrangement for her to live, at least part of the year, a little way out of town, with people you could fully trust.

‘Do not doubt that, should God spare me to enjoy the fortune to which Mr. G. looks forward, I shall most liberally reward your goodness to one born under an evil star.

‘I have the honour to remain, yours,

‘FELICIE G.

‘P.S. My name here is Madame Dumarques.’

‘That,’ exclaimed Lucius, ‘must surely be the letter of a mother!’

‘Yes; and not a letter from a wife to her husband. The Mr. G. spoken of in the letter is evidently the husband of the writer.’

‘Strange that the care of a beloved child should have been intrusted to such a man as your son.’

‘Men of pleasure have few friends,’ answered Mr. Sivewright. ‘I daresay this Mr. G. had no one save the companion of the gaming-table to whom he could appeal in his difficulty.’

‘Do you consider there is sufficient evidence here to show that Lucille was the child alluded to?’

‘No other child ever came to Bond-street.’

‘True. Then the case seems clear enough. She was not your son’s daughter, but the child of these people, and committed to his care.’

‘Read on, and you will discover farther details of the affair.’

The fourth letter was from ‘H. G.’ It was evidently written in answer to a letter of complaint or remonstrance from Ferdinand Sivewright. It ran thus :

‘My dear Fellow,—Your reproaches are most unjust. I always send money when I have it; but I have not acquired the art of coiner, nor am I clever enough to accomplish a successful forgery. In a

word, you can't get blood out of a stone. You have had some hundreds since you first took charge of the little one; and in any other home I had found for her, she would not have cost me a third of the money. I do not forget that you helped me out of a diabolical difficulty, and that if you had not happened to be our visitor when the old gentleman surprised me in our Devonian cottage, and if you had not with sublime tact assumed *my* responsibilities, I should have been irretrievably ruined. Never shall I forget that mid-summer morning when I had to leave all I loved in your care, and to turn my back upon that dear little home, to accompany my uncle to London, assuming the careless gaiety of a bachelor, while my heart was racked with anguish for those I left behind. However, we played the comedy well, and, please God, the future will compensate Félicie and me for all we have suffered in the past and suffer in the present. Be as reasonable, dear old fellow, as you have been useful, and rely upon it I shall by and by amply reward your fidelity.—Yours,

H. G.'

'We get a clearer glimpse of the story in this,' said Lucius, as he finished the fourth letter. 'It seems easy enough now to read the riddle. A young man, with large expectations from an uncle who, at

any moment, may disinherit him, has secretly married; perhaps a woman beneath him in station. At any rate, his choice is one which his uncle would inevitably disapprove. He hides his young wife in some quiet Devonshire village, where his friend, your son, visits him. There, during your son's visit, the old man appears. By some means or other he has tracked his nephew to this retreat. One mode of escape only suggests itself. Ferdinand Sivewright assumes the character of the husband and father, while the delinquent leaves the place at his uncle's desire, and accompanies him back to London. Out of this incident arises the rest. Ferdinand Sivewright takes charge of the child, the wife retires to her native country, where she has, no doubt, friends who can give her a home. The whole business is thus, as it were, dissolved. The husband is free to play the part of a bachelor till his kinsman's death. That is my reading of the story.'

'I do not think you can be far out,' answered Mr. Sivewright. 'You can look over the rest of the letters at your leisure. They are less important than those you have read, but may contain some stray scraps of information which you can piece together. There is one letter in which Madame Dumarques speaks of the miniature. She sends it in order that



the little girl may learn to know her mother's features ; and in this, as in other letters from this lady, there appears a foreboding of early death. " We may never meet on earth," she writes. " I like to think that she will know my face if ever I am so blest as to meet her in heaven." '

' You think, then, that this poor mother died young ?' inquired Lucius.

' That is my idea. The husband speaks of her failing health in one of his letters. He has been to Rouen to see her, and has found her sadly changed. " You would hardly know that lovely face, Sivewright, could you see it now," he writes.'

Lucius folded and tied up the letters with a careful hand.

' May I have these to keep ?' he asked.

' You may. They are the only dower which your wife will receive from her parents.'

' I don't know that,' answered Lucius ; ' her father may still live, and if he does, he shall at least give her his name.'

' What, you mean to seek out this nameless father ?'

' I do. The task may be long and difficult, but I am determined to unravel this tangled skein.'

' Do what you like, so long as you and Lucille

do not leave me to die alone,' said the old man sadly.

'Have no fear of that,' replied Lucius. 'This investigation can wait. I will not desert my post in your sick room, until you are on the highroad to recovery.'

'You are a good fellow!' exclaimed Mr. Sive-wright, with unusual warmth; 'and I do not regret having trusted you.'

## CHAPTER X.

### MYSTIC MUSIC.

It was now nearly dark, and Lucius was anxious to obtain a speedy release from the sick room, lest the time should creep on towards the hour at which Mr. Otranto's minions were to seek for admittance at the little back door. He made some excuse therefore for bidding his patient 'good-night' soon after this. There would be time for him to see that the coast was clear, and to keep watch for the coming of the two men.

He met Lucille in the corridor, coming up-stairs for the night, at least two hours earlier than usual—a most opportune retirement.

She gave a little start at meeting him, and her look was more of surprise than pleasure.

'You here, Lucius!' she exclaimed.

'Yes, dear; I have been with your grandfather. I heard you were lying down, and would not disturb you. I hope you feel refreshed by that long rest.'

'As much refreshed as I can be while I have

such cause for anxiety. I am going to my room early, so as to be near my grandfather.'

'That is wise; only remember you must try to sleep. You must not be watching and listening all night. If Mr. Sivewright wants anything he will call you. Good-night, my dearest.'

He folded her in his arms, and pressed a tender kiss upon the sad lips; but her only response to his caress was a weary sigh. There was something amiss here; what, he knew not; but he felt she had some sorrow which she refused to share with him, and the thought wounded him to the quick. He left her perplexed and unhappy.

The old clock on the staircase struck eight as Lucius passed it. He had an hour to wait before the arrival of the detectives. What to do with himself during that time, he knew not. The lower part of the house was wrapped in darkness, save for the feeble glimmer of a candle in the great kitchen, where Mr. and Mrs. Wincher were seated at their frugal supper. Lucius looked and beheld them regaling themselves on a stony-looking Dutch cheese and an overgrown lettuce—a gigantic vegetable, which they liberally soused with vinegar.

From Mrs. Wincher, Lucius obtained a candle, which he carried to the parlour—a room that looked

empty and desolate without Lucille. There was the sofa upon which she had rested; there her book; there her work-basket.

He sat down amidst these tokens of her presence, and stared at the flame of the candle, sorely troubled in mind. What was this gulf between them, this feeling of severance that was so strange to his heart? Why was it that there returned to him ever and anon a suspicion formless, inexplicable, but which troubled him beyond measure? He strove to escape from gloomy thoughts by the aid of an old enchanter. He took his violin from its hiding-place, and began to play a tender *sotto-voce* strain, which soothed his troubled mind. His thoughts drifted into a smoother channel. He thought of that grand discovery made to-night—a discovery which, at another time, he would have deemed all-sufficient for happiness: Lucille was not the child of the wretch his hand had slain. The comfort of that thought was measureless.

Could he do wrong in accepting the evidence of those letters—in giving them this interpretation? Surely not. They seemed to point but to one conclusion. They told a story in which there were few missing links. It remained for him to trace the father who had thus abandoned his child. It would be a more pleasing task than that which Lucille had

imposed upon him when she bade him seek for Ferdinand Sivewright.

But why had this father—who from the tone of his letters seemed to have been fond of his child—abandoned her entirely to her fate, and made no effort to reclaim her in after years? That question might be answered in two ways. The father might have died years ago, carrying his secret with him to the grave. Or it is just possible that this man, in whom weakness might be near akin to wickedness, had made some advantageous alliance after the death of Lucille's mother, and had deemed it wise to be silent as to his first marriage, even at the cost of his daughter's love.

Thus reasoned Lucius as he played a slow pensive melody, always *sotto voce*.

Thought and music together had beguiled him into forgetfulness of time. The clock struck nine while he was still playing.

He put down his violin immediately, left the lighted candle on the table, and went out to the back door. Mr. Wincher was there before him, the door open, and two men standing on the threshold.

'We've got our orders from Mr. Otranto, sir,' said the elder of the two. 'I'm to stop all night in the room that contains the vallibles, and my mate is

to be in and out and keep a hi upon the back premises. But if you have anything you'd like to suggest, sir, we're at your service.'

'No,' said Lucius; 'I've no doubt Mr. Otranto knows his business a great deal better than I do. Come with me, Mr.—'

'Simcox, sir. My mate is Joe Cleaver.'

'Come with me then, Mr. Simcox, and I'll show you the room that needs watching. Mr. Cleaver can stay in the kitchen. I daresay he can make himself comfortable there.'

'Purvided he isn't timid of beadles,' interjected Mrs. Wincher; 'which the crickets are that tame they plays about the table while we're at supper.'

Mr. Cleaver pronounced himself indifferent as to beetles or crickets.

'They won't hurt me,' he said; 'I've had to deal with worse than black-beadles in my time.'

Mr. Simcox followed Lucius to the room that contained the Sivewright collection—that curious chaos of relics and fragments which represented the knowledge and labour of a lifetime. The detective surveyed these works of art with a disparaging eye.

'There doesn't seem to be much for the melting-pot here!' he exclaimed; 'or much portable property of any kind.'



‘There’s a good deal of curious old china,’ answered Lucius, ‘which is, I believe, more valuable than silver. The thief who stole the old plate might return for that.’

‘He might,’ answered Mr. Simcox with a sceptical air; ‘but he must be a cut above the common run of thieves if he knows much about old chaney; the sterling metal is what most of ’em go in for. However, here I am, sir, and I know my duty. I’m ready to watch as many nights as you please.’

‘Very good,’ said Lucius; ‘then I’ll wish you good-night, Mr. Simcox; and if you want a mattress and a blanket, I daresay Mr. Wincher—the old man who opened the door to you—will give you them. I don’t live in the house, but I shall be here early to-morrow morning to learn the result of your watch. Good-night.’

He had his hand upon the door, when a sound from the other side of the hall—low, but still sufficiently audible—startled him as if it had been the fall of a thunderbolt. It was his own violin, played softly—a wild minor strain, dirge-like and unearthly. Scarcely had he heard the notes when they died away. It was almost as if he had dreamed them. There was not time for him to utter an exclamation before all was dumb. Then came a muffled sound,

like the cautious closing of a heavy door ; but that strange strain of melody possessed the soul and ears of Lucius, and he did not hear that stealthy closing of the hall door.

‘Did you hear that?’ he asked the detective eagerly.

‘Hear what, sir?’

‘A violin played in the opposite room.’

‘Well, no, sir, I can’t say as I did. Yet I fancy I did hear somethink in the way of music—a barrel-organ, perhaps, outside.’

‘Strange!’ muttered Lucius ; ‘my senses must be growing confused. I have been too long without sleep, or I have thought too much. My brain has been unceasingly on the rack ; no wonder it should fail. Yet I could have sworn I heard a wild unearthly strain—like—like other music I heard once.’

It was a foolish thing, he felt, to be disturbed by such a trifle. A mere fancy, doubtless, but he was disturbed by it nevertheless. He hurried across to the parlour where he had left his violin. There it lay, just as he had put it down. The room was empty.

‘What if my violin were enchanted now, and could play of itself?’ he thought idly. ‘Or what if the furies who torment me with the slow tortures of

remorse had invented a new agony, that I should hear ghostly strains—mere phantasmal sounds—reminding me of the music I heard in the American forest?’

He put the violin back into its case, locked it, and put the key in his waistcoat-pocket. The lock was a Chubb.

‘Neither mortals nor fiends shall play upon you any more to-night, my little Amati,’ he said.

He was glad to escape from the house presently, having no farther business there. He felt that Lucille and the old man were securely guarded for that night at least. To-morrow might furnish a clue to the mystery—to-morrow might reveal the thief.

The thought set his brain on fire. Who opened that door? Who admitted the midnight plunderer? Would to-morrow’s light bring with it the answer to that question?

## CHAPTER XI.

### AT FAULT.

GEOFFREY HOSSACK rushed down to Stillmington as fast as a recklessly-driven hansom and an express train could take him. His heart seemed to sing aloud as he went, 'I am coming, my love, I am coming; and we will part no more.'

How sweet, how rustic, how peaceful, the little uncommercial town seemed to him to-day in its verdant setting; the low hills, on whose grassy slopes tall chestnuts spread their wide branches, and the dark foliage of the beech gleamed silvery as the warm breezes ruffled it; fertile pastures where the aftermath grew deep, green tinged with russet—over all the land late summer's vanishing glory.

'I could live here with her for ever,' he thought; 'ay, in the humblest cottage half hidden among those green lanes, which seem to lead nowhere. I could live all my life with her, cut off from all the rest of the world, and never languish for its hollow

pleasures, and never sigh for change. God grant I may find her reasonable! God grant that she may accept my simple assurance of her release, and make me happy!’

On the very threshold of Mrs. Bertram’s modest dwelling a sudden fear seized him. Something in the aspect of the house to-day struck him as unfamiliar. The window was shut—an unusual circumstance, for Janet loved air. The flowers in the little rustic stand that screened the window had a neglected look. There were dead leaves on the geraniums, which were wont to be so carefully tended. The care of those flowers had been Janet’s early morning task. How often had he walked this way before breakfast, for the sake of catching one chance glimpse of the noble face bending over those flowers!

‘Good Heavens, can she be ill?’ he thought with agonising fear. He knocked softly, lest she should be indeed lying ill up-stairs and the sound of the knocker disturb her.

The maid who opened the door had come straight from the washtub, breathless, with bare steaming arms.

‘Is Mrs. Bertram at home—and—and well?’ asked Geoffrey eagerly.

‘Mrs. Bertram, sir? O dear, no; she left us

three days ago, and the apartments are to let. Missus doesn't put up any bill, because she says it gives such a low look; but there's a card at the grocer's.'

'Mrs. Bertram has moved!' said Geoffrey, his heart beating very fast. 'Where has she gone?'

It might be to the next street only. She had found the rooms small perhaps, as her pupils increased. Yet even a few minutes' delay dashed his high hopes. It seemed hard to meet any kind of hindrance at the outset.

'She didn't leave no address,' answered the girl; 'she's left Stillmington for some time. She said the air was relaxshing at this time of year, and the little girl didn't seem quite well. So she went. She means to come back in the winter, she told us, and go on with her pupils; but she was going somewheres by the sea.'

'But surely she must have left some address with your mistress, in order that letters might be forwarded to her?'

'No, she didn't, sir. I heard missus ast her that very question about the letters, and she says to missus that it didn't matter—there wouldn't be no letters for her, not of no consequence, as she would write and tell her friends her new address. She didn't exactly know where she was going, she says.'

‘When did she leave?’ asked Geoffrey in despair. How could the Fates treat him so hardly?

‘Three days ago—last Wednesday.’

The very day of his journey down to Hampshire. She had lost no time in taking flight. She had gone almost immediately after he left Stillmington. Could he doubt that her motive had been to avoid him—to flee temptation? For did he not know that she loved him?

‘Mrs. Bertram left very suddenly, did she not?’ he asked of the maid-of-all-work, who was breathing hard with impatience to be gone, knowing that her mistress awaited her in the washhouse, and would assuredly lecture her for gossiping.

‘Yes, sir, it was quite suddent. She gave missus a week’s rent instead of the reglar notice.’

‘And you have really no idea where she went when she left you?’

‘No, sir. She went away by the London train. That’s all I can tell you.’

‘Thanks,’ said Geoffrey with a sigh.

He rewarded the girl with a half-crown, almost mechanically, and departed heartsore. How could she be so cruel as to hide herself from him—to put a new barrier between them! Was she afraid of his importunity—afraid that she would lack strength to resist his pleading?



By the sea! She had gone to the sea-side. That was information of the vaguest character.

‘If I have to scour the English coast, I will find her,’ he said to himself desperately.

But it was just possible she might leave England—that she might hide herself in some obscure village in Normandy or Brittany, where the cockney-tourist had not yet penetrated. The field was wide, to say the least of it.

‘She will surely let her brother know where she is?’ he thought presently; and with that thought came a brief moment of hopefulness, which quickly changed again to despair. If she wanted to avoid him, Geoffrey, she would scarcely trust her secret to his bosom friend Lucius.

There was that ever-ready medium—that universal go-between—the second column of the *Times*. He might advertise. He wrote a long appeal, so worded that, to the stranger, it was an absolute hieroglyphic, telling her that she was free—the only barrier that could divide them had been long removed—and entreating her to communicate with him immediately. This appeal he headed ‘*Voi che sapéte*’—the opening words of her favourite song. She could hardly fail to understand.

But what if she did not see the *Times*? And if

she were out of England, or even buried deep in some remote English watering-place, the chances against her seeing it were as ten to one. He sent the same advertisement to Galignani, and to a dozen provincial newspapers, chosen almost at random, but covering a wide area. He sent cheques to pay for a month's insertions in every paper. He felt himself transformed into a man of business, and went to work as actively as if he had been advertising a new cocoa or a new hair-dye.

This done, and there being nothing to detain him at Stillmington, he went back to Hillersdon, much to the delight of his cousins Belle and Jessie, who had in no wise expected this prompt return of the deserter. There was some comfort to him in the idea of being amidst the scenes of Janet's youth. He went over to Tyrrelhurst, the cathedral town, saw the Registrar of Births, Deaths, and Marriages, and found the entry of that fatal union which stood between him and happiness.

Yes, there it was: 'Frederick Vandeleur, gentleman, &c. &c., to Janet Davoren.' The ceremony had been legal enough. Nothing but some previous contract could invalidate such a marriage; and was it not very probable that this villain's assertion of a previous marriage was but a lie, invented to release

him from a union that had become troublesome to him?

‘I wish to Heaven I had as good a certificate of the scoundrel’s death,’ thought Geoffrey; ‘but even if I find her and tell her that he is dead, I doubt if my bare assertion will satisfy her scruples.’

He made a pilgrimage to Wykhamston, prowled about the gray old church, talked to the sexton, who had been an old man twenty years ago, and who calmly survived all changes, like a being over whom Time had no power. From him Geoffrey heard a great deal about the old rector and his beautiful daughter, who had played the organ, and how a stranger had come to Wykhamston, who took a great fancy to playing the organ, and played wonderful; and how Miss Davoren used oftentimes to be in the church practising when the stranger came in; and how not long after she ran away from home, as some folks said, and he, the sexton, was afraid no good had come of those meetings in the church.

To this Geoffrey listened silently, wounded, as he always was, by the thought that she whom he loved so dearly had left her home under a cloud, were it but the lightest breath of suspicion.

Even to this sexton he must needs defend his idol.

‘I have reason to know that Miss Davoren was married to that gentleman before he came to Wykhamston,’ he said. ‘It was a secret marriage, and she was foolish enough to leave her home without informing her parents of the step she had taken; but she was that man’s wife, and no shadow of dishonour can tarnish her name.’

‘Deary me!’ exclaimed the sexton; ‘and our poor dear rector took it so to heart. Some folks think it was that as killed him, though the doctors called it heart-disease of long standing.’

Geoffrey went from the church to the rectory, an overgrown thatched cottage, quaint and old, with plastered walls and big chimney-stacks; the garden all abloom with late roses—the new incumbent evidently a prosperous gentleman.

He loitered by the tall privet-hedge a little while, gathered a rose from a bush that grew within reach—a rose which he put carefully in his pocket-book—frail memorial of her he loved.

This pilgrimage occupied an entire day; for the young man lingered about Wykhamston as if loth to leave the spot where Janet had once lived—as if he almost hoped to meet the phantom of her girlhood in one of those low water meadows where he wandered listlessly by the reedy trout streams.

Belle and Jessie pouted a little at this desertion, yet would not complain. Were they not fortunate in dear Geoffrey's return? And if they questioned or teased him he might take flight again.

'I hope you are not going to desert us to-morrow,' said Belle, on the evening of his return from Wykhamston.

'Why do you lay such a tremendous stress upon to-morrow?' asked Geoffrey, with a comfortable yawn. He was stretched on a rustic bench outside the drawing-room windows smoking, while these damsels conversed with him from within.

'Have you forgotten?'

'Forgotten what?' with another yawn. 'How sleepy this country air makes one!'

'Yes, and how stupid sometimes!' exclaimed Jessie. 'You might have remembered that to-morrow is the day for Lady Baker's *fête*.'

'Ah, to be sure! She's a very nice old party, that Lady Baker of yours. I shall make a point of being in attendance upon you.'

## CHAPTER XII.

### TROUBLES THICKEN.

THERE was plenty of work for Lucius in his surgery when he went home, after inducting Mr. Otranto's men in their duties at Cedar House. There were the medicines to be made up, and to be taken round to the patients that night, by the sleepy boy, who looked unutterable reproaches at his master for this unwonted neglect of duty.

'Some of the places will be shut, I should think,' he said with an injured air, as he ground some nauseous drug furiously with a stone pestle; 'and some of the folks gone to bed. We've never been so late before.'

'I don't think our neighbours hereabouts are renowned for their early habits,' answered Lucius, unabashed by this reproof. 'If you find people are gone to bed, you can bring the medicines home, and take them out again early to-morrow morning. You

needn't go on knocking and ringing if you don't get answered quickly.'

'Very well, sir,' murmured the boy with a yawn. 'They'll be up at all the public's of course : there's the liniment for Mrs. Purdew's sprained wrist, and the lotion for Mr. Tweaker's black eye; and they'll be up at the butcher's, and at the general round the corner, where the children's down with measles, I daresay. But I expect to find the private gentlefolks gone to bed.'

'Give me that rhubarb, and hold your tongue,' said Lucius.

His medicines were soon made up and dispatched; and he was on the point of leaving his surgery for the night, when he put his hand in his pocket in search of a key, and found the bottle he had taken from Mr. Sivewright's bedside.

'Good heavens!' he exclaimed; 'are mind and memory failing me altogether that I could forget this?'

He held the bottle between him and the flame of the gas. The liquid, which had been clear enough when he sent it out of his surgery, had now a slightly clouded look.

'I wonder whether I have such a thing as a bit



of copper gauze?' he thought, as he put down the bottle.

He looked in several small drawers in the table on which he made up his medicines, and finally found the object he sought for. He poured the medicine into a glass vessel and applied his test.

The experiment showed him that there was arsenic in the medicine. The quantity was of the smallest, but the poison was there. He repeated his experiment, to make assurance doubly sure. Yes, there could be no shadow of doubt. Arsenic had been introduced into the medicine since it had left his hands yesterday afternoon.

Whose was the guilty hand which had done this thing? His vague suspicion arose before him all at once in the shape of an awful fact, and the horror of it almost paralysed thought. Who could have seemed more secure than this harmless old man, lying on his sick bed, tenderly watched by loving eyes, ministered to by dutiful hands—guarded, it would seem, from the possibility of danger? Yet even there a murderer had penetrated; and by slow steps, by means so gradual as almost to defy suspicion, that feeble life was assailed.

Who could the assassin be but that old servant

in whose fidelity Homer Sivewright trusted from the mere force of habit? Yes; the case seemed clear enough, looked at by the light of this new discovery. Jacob Wincher, who knew the full value of the collection, had begun a systematic course of plunder—who could tell how long it had gone on? perhaps ever since Mr. Sivewright had taken to his bed—and, in order to escape the detection which must have been inevitable on the old man's recovery, he had taken measures to make his master's illness mortal.

'Perhaps he argues that by dropping a pinch of arsenic into his master's medicine now and then he only assists the progress of the disease, and that his crime is something less than murder,' thought Lucius bitterly.

He was angry with himself, because this very day—after suspecting Jacob Wincher, nay, after feeling convinced of his guilt—he had suffered himself to be hoodwinked, and had believed the old servant to be an honest man. He remembered Mr. Otranto's dictum, so absolutely expressed, and smiled at the fatuity of a man whom the world deemed possessed of almost superhuman powers.

'Yes, the scheme is transparent. He has admitted the man I saw night after night, and has

doubtless made away with all that is most valuable in the collection. He knows that his master's recovery would be his ruin, and he means to prevent that recovery. His apparent candour this morning was a profound stroke of policy. He took alarm from what I said to his wife—guessed that I had seen the entrance of his accomplice, and played his cards accordingly. Not clever enough for a thief, did you say, Mr. Otranto? Why, here is a man clever enough to carry on simultaneous robbery and murder, and yet to wear the semblance of most consummate innocence. This is evidently a development of intellectual power among the dangerous classes for which your previous experience has not prepared you.'

Lucius laughed the laugh of scorn at the thought of Mr. Otranto's shortsightedness.

But what was he, Lucius, to do? That was the question. How was he to avert the danger from his patient, and yet avoid alarming him? To alarm him might be fatal. To tell a man almost at Death's door that he had been brought to this pass by a slow poisoner in his own household, would surely be to complete the murder. Where was the sick man with nerves strong enough to endure such a revelation?

'I must get rid of these Winchers, yet not tell

Mr. Sivewright the cause of their dismissal,' thought Lucius. 'I can invent some plausible excuse for their disappearance. And when they are gone—Stay, might it not be better to let them stop, and to keep watch over my patient myself—so close a watch, that if foul play were attempted I must discover the delinquent?'

He meditated upon this question for some time; now leaning one way, now the other.

'No,' he decided at last; 'murder shall no longer lurk within the shadow of those walls! At any cost I will get rid of those wretches, with their pretence of long service and fidelity.'

He thought of Mrs. Wincher, whom he had a little while ago considered one of the most well-meaning of women, completely devoted to her young mistress, faithful, affectionate.

'She may not know the extent of her husband's iniquity,' he thought; for it was painful to him to believe that the woman who had hovered about Love's rosy pathway like a protecting angel was among the vilest of her sex.

'What about this night?' he asked himself with painful anxiety. He had left a guard upon the house and its treasures, but what guard had he set upon that old man's life? The doors of the sick room

might be locked ever so securely, and yet the assassin might enter. Wincher and his accomplice might know of that secret staircase, in spite of the old servant's affectation of entire ignorance; and between the secret staircase and the sick chamber there was only a sliding panel.

'I'll go back to-night,' said Lucius. 'I should be a dastard if, with my present knowledge, I left that old man unprotected. I'll go back, and get into the garden from the creek. I shall find the detective on his beat at the back, no doubt. I'll warn him about the secret staircase; so that no one shall get to Mr. Sivewright's room that way, at any rate.'

He lost no time in putting his resolve into execution. It was a few minutes past eleven, and the distance to Cedar House was about half an hour's walk. Before midnight he would be there.

Fortune favoured him. The night was dark, and there was no one to observe his trespass as he walked along the deserted wharf and stepped lightly across the untenanted barges. From one of these it was easy to get upon the low wall of Mr. Sivewright's garden. He saw a light in the brewhouse, where he had found the entrance to the secret stair. The door was open, and the detective was lounging against the door-post, smoking his pipe and enjoying the night air.

‘Who’s there?’ he demanded in cautious tones, as Lucius’s light footstep sounded on the weedy gravel.

‘A friend—Davoren,’ answered Lucius, and then told the man the reason of his return.

‘This is a worse case than even I thought it,’ he said. ‘There has been an attempt to poison the old gentleman up-stairs, as well as to rob him.’

The man looked incredulous. Lucius briefly stated his grounds for this statement.

‘There has been nothing stirring here?’ he asked.

‘Nothing, except the beadles. They’re on short rations, and it seems to make ’em active. I’ve been in and out ever since you left.’

‘Has Wincher gone to bed?’

‘Two hours ago.’

‘And you are sure he has never stirred since?’

‘Quite sure. I’ve been past his door about every ten minutes or so, and have heard him and his wife snoring as peaceable as a pair of turtle-doves.’

‘Well, I’ve come to share your watch till morning, if you’ve no objection. After the discovery I’ve just told you about, I couldn’t rest.’

‘No objections, sir. If you’d brought a case-bottle with a trifle of spirit it might have been welcome.’

‘I am sorry that I omitted to provide myself with such a thing,’ answered Lucius politely.

He showed the detective the door opening upon the secret staircase, and told him not to leave the brewhouse while he, Lucius, went up-stairs to see that all was right on the upper floor.

‘If the man who came last night should come again to-night, he will try to enter by that door,’ said Lucius, pointing to the door by which he had just come in. ‘Leave it open, and your light burning just where it is. He’ll take that to mean that all’s right, most likely. But be sure you keep in the background yourself till he’s fairly inside.’

‘I hope I know my business, sir,’ replied the detective with dignity.

Lucius went through the back premises to the hall. The doors in the interior of the house had been left open for the convenience of the watchers. His footsteps, cautiously as he trod, resounded on the stone-paved floor; so at the foot of the staircase he drew off his boots, and went up-stairs noiselessly in his stockings. He thought of Mr. Sivewright’s complaint of that mysterious foot-fall which had disturbed his slumbers in the deep of night,—the footstep of the secret assassin. To-night he was surely guarded. From the lower part of the house



no one could approach him without the knowledge of the watcher lying in wait below.

But how about those upper rooms, in one of whose windows he had seen the light burning last night? Was there not some mystery there? He determined to explore that topmost story, now, in the darkness of the night even, rather than leave his doubts unsatisfied.

Vain determination! The door of communication between the corridor and the upper staircase was locked. He tried it with a cautious hand, and found it firmly secured against him. Then he remembered how Lucille had locked that door and put the key in her pocket after they came down-stairs from the loft.

If that door had been locked and the key in Lucille's possession last night, how came the light in the upper window? That was a new problem for him to solve.

He crept along the passage, and listened at the old man's door. He could hear his patient's breathing, laboured but regular. There was no other sound in the room.

He waited here for some time, listening; but there was nothing save the old man's breathing to disturb the stillness, nothing until from Lucille's

room there came the sound of a long deep sigh—a sigh from a heart sorely oppressed.

That sound smote his own heart with unspeakable pain. It betrayed such deep unhappiness—a sorrow which could only find vent in the dead of the night, in deep heart-broken sighs.

‘Is it her grandfather’s danger that makes her so unhappy?’ he wondered. ‘Strange; for the old man has never been particularly kind to her—has always kept her at arm’s length, as it were. Yet, I daresay, to her tender nature the thought of approaching death is too terrible. She cannot face the inevitable doom; she lies awake and broods upon the approaching calamity. Poor child! if she but knew how baseless has been her dream of a father’s love, how vainly her tenderest feelings have been wasted on a wretch who has not even the poor claim of kindred to her love!’

For more than an hour he waited, sometimes outside his patient’s door, sometimes by Lucille’s; but nothing happened to alarm him throughout his watch, and he knew the approach to the secret staircase was securely guarded. No intruder could reach Mr. Sivewright’s room that night, at any rate.

Lucius went down-stairs at last, and smoked a cigar in the brewhouse while the detective took his

round through all the lower rooms. Thus the night wore away, and in the gray dawn Lucius once more mounted the stairs, and paced the corridor. Again all was silence. This time he heard no sigh from Lucille. His heart was relieved by the thought that she was sleeping peacefully.

With the dawn—Aurora the rosy-fingered showing poorly at this east-end of London—he made his way back by the garden wall, the barges, and the wharf, and returned to his own abode, which looked sordid and cheerless enough beneath the pale light of newborn day—cold and dreary and poor, lacking the picturesqueness of a lodge in the primeval forest, and but slightly surpassing it in luxury. He laid himself down and tried his hardest to sleep; but the thought of old Homer Sivewright and his hidden enemy, the domestic poisoner, drove away slumber.

‘I shall sleep no more till I have fathomed this mystery,’ he said to himself wearily.

But at last, when the sun was shining through the poor screen afforded by a calico blind, he did fall into a kind of sleep, or rather that feverish condition which is neither sleeping nor waking. From this state he woke with a start—that kind of shock which jars the nerves of the dreamer when his vision ends on the brink of a precipice, whence he feels himself

descending to fathomless depths below. His forehead was damp with a nameless horror; he trembled as he rose in his bed.

It was as if a voice had spoken in his ear as he slept.

‘What if Lucille were the poisoner?’

Great Heaven! how could so vile a thought shape itself in his mind? Yet with the thought there arose before him, as if it had been shown to him upon the open pages of a book, all those circumstances which might seem to point to this hideous conclusion. Who else, in that lonely old house, had the same power to approach the patient? In whom else would Homer Sivewright trust as blindly?

He remembered Lucille’s agitation when he first hinted the possibility of poison—that whitening cheek, that sudden look of horror. Might not guilt look thus?

And then her emotion yesterday morning, when she had dropped lifeless at his feet? Could anything *but* guilt be thus stricken?

‘O God,’ he cried, ‘I am surely going mad! Or how else could such horrible thoughts enter my mind? Do I not know her to be good and pure, loving, unselfish, compassionate? And with the conviction of her goodness firmly rooted in my heart,

can I for one moment fear,—ay, even though circumstances should weave a web of proof around her, leaving not one loophole for escape?’

He wrenched his thoughts away from the facts which seemed to condemn the woman he so deeply loved, and by a great effort of will dismissed a fancy which seemed the most cruel treason against love.

‘Does the evil one inspire our dreams sometimes?’ he wondered. ‘So vile a thought could never have entered my head if a voice had not whispered the hateful suggestion into my sleeping ear. But there shall be an end at once of suspicion and of mystery. I will no longer treat Lucille as a child. I frightened her more by my hints and suggestions than I could have done had I told her the plain facts. I will trust to her firmness and fortitude, and tell her all without reserve—the discovery of the attempted poisoning, the robbery, the secret entrance of the man I watched the night before last. I will trust her most fully.’

This resolve gave extreme relief to his mind. He dressed hurriedly, took a brief breakfast of his own preparation, Mrs. Babb the charwoman not yet having left her domestic circle to minister to his wants, and at half-past eight o’clock found himself once more outside the iron gate which shut in the chief object

of his love. Mrs. Wincher admitted him with a solemn and mournful visage.

‘Is there anything amiss?’ asked Lucius anxiously.

‘I don’t believe there’ll ever be anything more in this blessed house that isn’t amiss,’ answered Mrs. Wincher obscurely, but with a despondent air that augered ill.

‘Mr. Sivewright is worse, I suppose,’ said Lucius.

‘Mr. Sivewright is much as usual, grumble, grumble—this here don’t agree with him, and that there turns sour on his stomach, and so on—enough to worrit folks into early graves. But there’s a deal more the matter than that this morning.’

‘For Heaven’s sake, speak plainly,’ cried Lucius impatiently.

‘Our missy is in a burning fever. She was heavy and lollopy-like all yesterday afternoon, and her cheeks, that have been as white as a chaney tea-plate latterly, was red and hot-looking, and she slept heavy and breathed short in her sleep, for I stood and watched her; and she moved about in a languid way that wasn’t a bit like her quick light ways when she’s well. But I thought it was nothink more than what you says yourself yesterday morning—want of rest. I should ’ave thought you might ’ave knowed

she was sickening for a fever,' added Mrs. Wincher reproachfully.

'Misfortune does not always declare itself so plainly. I could see that she was ill, and that was all. God grant the fever may not be very much, after all!'

'Not very much!' exclaimed Mrs. Wincher. 'Why, when I took her a hearty cup of tea at half-past seven this morning, which was as soon as I could get my kittle boiled, she was raving like a lunatic—going on about her father, and such-like—in a dreadful way, and didn't recognise me no more nor if I'd been a stranger out of the street.'

This was a bad hearing; but Lucius bore the shock calmly enough. Troubles and perplexities had rained thickly upon him of late, and there is a kind of stoicism which grows out of familiarity with sorrow.

'Take me to Miss Sivewright's room,' he said quietly, 'and let me see what is the matter.'

'I've moved her out of the little dressing-room into her own room,' said Mrs. Wincher; 'me and my good gentleman carried the bed with her on it while she was asleep. I thought as how it wouldn't do for her grandpa to hear her carrying on that wild.'

'You were right enough there. Yet she was a



faithful guardian, and your master is now in the power of his foes.'

'Foes, sir? What foes can he have in this house?'

'The same people who found their way to the plate in the muniment chest might find their way to Mr. Sivewright's room,' said Lucius.

'Lor, sir, how you do frighten one! But what harm could even thieves and robbers want to do to a harmless old man, unless he stood between 'em and the property?'

'I won't stop to discuss that question with you now, Mrs. Wincher. I shall have something to say to you and your husband presently. Have the detectives gone?'

'Yes, sir; but they're coming back the same time to-night. One of 'em left a bit of a note for you. It's on the kitchen chimleypiece. I'll run and fetch it if you like.'

'Not till you have taken me to Miss Sivewright's room. Is she alone all this time?'

'Yes, sir; but she was asleep when I left her. She dozes off every now and then.'

'She must have a nurse to watch her, sleeping or waking.'

Mrs. Wincher led the way up-stairs, and to one

of the doors in the corridor out of which Mr. Sive-wright's room opened. For the first time Lucius found himself in Lucille's room—a spacious airy apartment, with three windows deep set in the solid walls, and provided with broad oak window-seats. A scantily furnished chamber, yet with that grace and prettiness of aspect which a girl's taste can give to the poorest surroundings. There were books, a few water-coloured sketches on the walls, a few oddments of old china tastefully disposed on the high oak chimneypiece, white muslin curtains to the windows, a well-worn Persian carpet in the centre of the dark oak floor—everywhere the most perfect neatness, cleanliness the most scrupulous.

Lucille was sleeping when Lucius and Mrs. Wincher entered; but at the sound of her lover's footsteps, lightly as he trod, she started, opened her eyes, and looked at him.

O, how sad to see those sweet eyes looking at him thus, without recognition! how sad to mark that dreamy unconscious stare in eyes that yesterday had been full of meaning! Lucius sank into a chair by the bed, fairly overcome. It was some moments before he was sufficiently master of himself to approach the case professionally, to go through the usual formula, with an aching heart.

She was very ill, with such an illness as might have been easily induced by long-continued anxiety and want of rest—anxious days, sleepless nights. The gravest feature in the case was the delirium—the inability to recognise familiar faces.

‘Lucille,’ he said, in a low tender voice, ‘don’t you know me?’

She did not answer him. Her head moved wearily on the pillow from side to side, while her lips murmured faintly. Lucius bent over her to catch the words.

‘You shouldn’t have come here, father,’ she said, ‘if you couldn’t forgive him. But no, no, you could not do him any harm—you could not be so vile as that. I have loved you so dearly. Papa, don’t you remember—the violin—our happy evenings?’

Thus the parched lips went on, in low broken murmurs, which were sometimes quite unintelligible.

‘It’s been all her father since she was took that way,’ said Mrs. Wincher.

‘Strange that her mind should brood thus upon that one memory,’ thought Lucius—‘the one tender remembrance of her childhood.’

He lingered for some time by the bedside, listening to those indistinct murmurs in which the name of ‘father’ was so often repeated. Then he began to

consider what he must do to secure the safety of this beloved sufferer.

To leave her in the custody of people whom he believed guilty of the deepest iniquity was not to be dreamed of. He must get rid of these Winchers at any hazard, bring in a sick nurse upon whose fidelity he could rely, and, so far as it was possible, keep watch upon the premises himself by day and night.

Get rid of the Winchers? How was that to be done? He had no authority for their dismissal.

There was one way, he thought, hazardous perhaps for his patient, but tolerably certain of immediate success. He must inform Mr. Sivewright of the robbery, and state on whom his suspicions fell. There was little doubt that on learning he had been robbed the *bric-à-brac* dealer would dismiss his old servants. The first thing to be done was to get the sick nurse and secure Lucille's safety, come what might.

He told Mrs. Wincher that he would return in half an hour or so to see her master, and left the house without giving her any farther hint as to his intention. He knew of a nurse in the immediate neighbourhood, a woman of the comfortable motherly order, of whose ministrations among his patients he had had ample experience, and he hailed the first cab

that hove in sight, and drove off in quest of this honest matron. Fortune favoured him. Mrs. Milderson, the nurse—like Mrs. Gamp, sick and monthly—had just returned from an interesting case in the West India-road.

On this worthy woman Lucius descended like a whirlwind: would hardly give her time to rummage up an apron or two and a clean print gown, let alone her brush and comb—as she said plaintively—ere he whisked her into the devouring jaws of the hansom, which swallowed her up, bundle and all, and conveyed her with almost electric speed to Cedar House.

Mrs. Wincher stared amain at this interloper, and would fain have kept her on the outer side of the iron gate.

‘And pray, Dr. Davory, what may this good lady want?’ she asked, surveying the nurse and bundle with looks of withering scorn.

‘This good lady’s name is Milderson; she is an honest and trustworthy person, and she has come to nurse Miss Sivewright.’

‘May I ask, Dr. Davory, by whose orders?’

‘By mine, the young lady’s medical attendant and her future husband,’ answered Lucius. ‘This way, if you please, Milderson. I’ll talk to you presently, Mrs. Wincher.’

He passed that astonished female, who stood agape, staring after him with bewildered looks, and then raising her eyes aloft to outraged Heaven—

‘And me not thought good enough to nurse our missy!’ she ejaculated. ‘Me, that took her through the measles, and had her on my lap three blessed days and nights with the chicken-pox. I couldn’t have thought it of you, Dr. Davory. And a stranger brought into this house without by your leave nor with your leave! Who’s to be respounceable for the safety of the bricklebrack after this, I should like to know!’

Having propounded this question to the unresponsive sky, Mrs. Wincher uttered a loud groan, as if disappointed at receiving no answer, and then slowly dragged her weary way to the house, sliding one slipped foot after the other in deepest dejection. She walked up-stairs with the same slipshod step, and waited in the corridor outside Lucille’s room with folded arms and a countenance in which a blank stare had succeeded to the workings of indignation.

This stony visage confronted Lucius when he emerged from the sick room, after about a quarter of an hour employed in giving directions to Mrs. Mil-derson.

‘Do you mean to say, Dr. Davory, that I’m not

to nurse my young missy?' asked Mrs. Wincher, stifled emotion trembling in every accent.

'That is my intention, Mrs. Wincher,' answered Lucius severely. 'First and foremost, you are not an experienced nurse; and secondly, I cannot trust you.'

'Not experienced, after taking that blessed dear through the chicken-pox—which she had it worse than ever chicken-pox was knowed within the memory of the chemist round the corner, in Condick-street, where I got the gray powders as I gave her—and after walking about with her in the measles till I was ready to drop! Not to be trusted after five-and-twenty years' faithful service! O, Dr. Davory, I couldn't have thought it of you!'

'Five-and-twenty years' service is a poor certificate if the service ends in robbery and attempted murder,' answered Lucius quietly.

'Attempted murder!' echoed Mrs. Wincher, aghast.

'Yes, that's a terrible word, Mrs. Wincher, isn't it? And this is the worst of all murders—domestic murder—the slow and secret work of the poisoner, whose stealthy hand introduces death into the medicine that should heal, the food that should nourish. Of all forms of assassination there can be none so vile as that.'



Mrs. Wincher uttered no syllable of reply. She could only gaze at the speaker in dumb wonderment. She began to fear that this young man was going mad.

‘He’s been eggziting and werrying of hisself till he’s on the high road to a lunacy asylum,’ she said to herself presently, when Lucius had passed her and gone into Mr. Sivewright’s room.

‘You took away my medicine yesterday morning,’ said the invalid in his most querulous tone, ‘and sent me none to replace it. However, as I feel much better without it, your physic was no loss.’

‘Pardon my inattention,’ said Lucius. ‘And you really feel better without the medicine? Those troublesome symptoms have abated, eh?’

They had abated, Mr. Sivewright said, and he went on to describe his condition, in which there was positive improvement.

‘I’m glad to find you so much better,’ Lucius said, ‘for you will be able to hear some rather disagreeable intelligence. You have been robbed.’

‘Robbed!’ cried the old man, starting up in his bed as if moved by a galvanic battery. ‘Robbed! Yes, I thought as much when I heard those footsteps. Robbed! My collection rifled of its gems, I suppose. The Capo di Monte—the Copenhagen—

the old Roman medals in the ebony cabinet — the Boucher tapestry!’ he exclaimed, running over the catalogue of his treasures breathlessly.

‘These are safe, for anything I know to the contrary. You had a monstrance in silver-gilt?’

‘Gold!’ cried the old man; ‘twenty-carat gold! I had it assayed. I gave thirty pounds for that monstrance to an old scoundrel who was going to break it up for the sake of the gems, and who believed it was lacquer. It had been stolen from some foreign church, no doubt. The emeralds alone are worth two hundred pounds. You don’t mean to tell me I’ve been robbed of that?’

‘I’m sorry to say that and some pieces of old silver are missing; but I hope to recover them.’

‘Recover the dead from the bottom of the sea and bring them to life again!’ cried Mr. Sivewright vehemently. ‘You might do that as easily as the other. Why, those things were in the muniment chest, and Wincher had the key. He has kept that key for the last twenty years.’

‘Some one has found his way to the chest in spite of Mr. Wincher’s care,’ answered Lucius gravely.

He went on to relate the particulars of the robbery. The old man got out of bed while he was

talking, and began to drag on his clothes with trembling hands.

‘I will not lie here to be plundered,’ he exclaimed, profoundly agitated.

‘Now, that is what I feared,’ cried Lucius. ‘If you do not obey me implicitly, I shall repent having told you the truth. You must remain in this room till you are strong enough to leave it. You can surely trust me to protect the property in which your generous confidence has given me the strongest interest.’

‘True, you are as much interested as I am,’ muttered the old man; ‘nay, more so, for life is before you, and is nearly over with me. *My* interest in these things is a vanishing one; yet I doubt if there would be rest for me in the grave if those fruits of my life’s labour were in jeopardy.’

‘Will you trust me to take care of this house and all it contains?’ asked Lucius anxiously. ‘Will you give me authority to dismiss these Winchers, whom I cannot but suspect of complicity with the thief, whoever he may be?’

‘Yes, dismiss them. They have robbed me, no doubt. I was a fool to trust old Wincher with the key of that chest; but he has served me so long, and I thought there was a dog-like fidelity in his nature,

that he would be content to grub on to the end of his days, asking nothing more than food and shelter. I thought it was against his interests to rob me. At his age a man should cling to his home as a mussel sticks to his rock. The fellow is as sober as an anchorite. One would suppose he could have no motive for dishonesty. But you had better dismiss him.'

'I have your permission to do so?'

'Yes.'

'Thank you, sir. It seems a hard thing, but I am convinced it is the right course. I will get your house taken good care of, depend upon it.'

'I trust you implicitly,' answered the old man, with a faint sigh, half fatigue, half despondency. 'You are the only friend I have upon earth—except Lucille. Why has she not been to me this morning?'

'She is not very well. Anxiety and want of rest have prostrated her for a little while.'

'Ill!' said Mr. Sivewright anxiously; 'that is bad. Poor little Lucille!'

'Pray don't be uneasy about her; be assured I shall be watchful.'

'Yes, I am sure of that.'

'I have brought in a nurse—now, you mustn't be angry with me, though in this matter I have dis-

obeyed you—a thoroughly honest, competent woman, who will attend to you and Lucille too.’

‘I detest strangers,’ said Mr. Sivewright; ‘but I suppose I must submit to the inevitable.’

‘Now, I want your permission to remain in the house for a night or two. I would stay altogether, were it not for the possibility of night patients. I can occupy the little room next this, and shall be at hand to attend you. Lucille has returned to her own room.’

‘Do as you please,’ answered Mr. Sivewright with wonderful resignation, ‘so long as you protect me from robbery.’

‘With God’s help I will protect you from every peril. By the way, since you say my medicine has done you no good, you shall take no more. Your food shall be prepared according to my directions, and brought you by Mrs. Milderson, the nurse. I told you some time ago that yours was a case in which I attached more importance to diet than to drugs. And now I’ll go and settle matters with Mr. and Mrs. Wincher.’

He had not far to go. Mrs. Wincher was still in the corridor, waiting for him with stony visage and folded arms.

‘I should be glad to see your husband, Mrs. Wincher,’ said Lucius.

‘My good gentleman is down-stairs, sir, and will be happy to wait upon you direckly minute.’

Lucius went down to the hall with Mrs. Wincher. Her good gentleman was pottering about among his master’s treasures, with a dusting-brush.

‘Mr. Wincher,’ said Lucius without preamble, ‘I have come to the determination that, under the very unpleasant circumstances which have arisen in this house, plain sailing is the wisest course. I have therefore informed Mr. Sivewright of the robbery.’

‘Indeed, sir! I should have thought you’d hardly have ventured that while he’s so ill. And how did he take it?’

‘Better than I expected: but he agreed with me as to the necessity of a step which I proposed to him.’

‘What might that be, sir?’

‘That you and Mrs. Wincher should immediately leave this house.’

The old man, who was feeble and somewhat bowed with age and hard work, drew himself up with an offended dignity that might have become a prince of the blood-royal.

‘If that is my master’s decision I am ready to go, sir,’ he said, without a quaver in his weak old voice. ‘If that is my master’s decision after five-and-

twenty years' faithful service, I cannot go too soon. Deborah, get our bits of things together, my dear, as fast as you conveniently can, while I go out and look about me for a room.'

'Lemaître, at his best, was not a finer actor than this old man,' thought Lucius. 'It is the perfection of art.'

Mrs. Wincher only stared and breathed hard. In her, indignation had paralysed the power of speech.

'If it were a mere question of the robbery,' said Lucius, 'I should not have counselled your dismissal. It would have gone hard with me if, once put upon my guard, I could not have protected the property in this house. But there is one thing more valuable than a man's property, and more difficult to protect, and that is his life. The reason of your dismissal, Mr. Wincher, is that there has been an attempt made by some one in this house—and you best know how many it contains—to poison your old master.'

'Poison!' echoed Jacob Wincher helplessly.

'Yes, I discovered arsenic last night in a half-filled medicine bottle which I took from your master's room. Some one had introduced arsenic into the medicine since it left my hands. Mr. Sive-



wright's symptoms of late have been those of arsenical poisoning. Under such circumstances you can hardly wonder that I wish to bring about a change of occupants in this house.'

'No, sir,' answered the old man, 'I don't wonder. Poison!—a poisoner at work in this house where we have watched so faithfully! It is too horrible. It is a mystery beyond my power to fathom. There have been only three of us in the house—my wife, and Miss Lucille, and me. And you think it was I or my wife that put poison into that bottle. Well, I can't wonder at that. It couldn't be Miss Lucille, so it lies between my wife and me. We're best out of the house, sir, after that. This house is no place for us. I hope you'll contrive to take good care of my master when we're gone, and I pray God that it may please Him in His good time to enlighten your mind about us, and to show, somehow, that neither I nor my good lady have tried to murder the master we've served faithfully for a quarter of a century.'

'If you are innocent, Mr. Wincher, I trust that fact may be speedily demonstrated. In the mean time you can hardly wonder that I think this house a safer place without your presence in it.'

'No, sir, that's natural enough. Deborah, my

good soul, will you get together those things of ours? The sooner the better.'

'I'll do what I can,' answered Mrs. Wincher, with a gasp; 'but I don't feel as if I had the proper use of my limbs.'

'There's the catalogue, sir,' suggested Jacob Wincher. 'Hadn't we better go through that before I leave, and see what is right and what isn't? It'll take some time, but it will be for the satisfaction of both parties. I've one catalogue, sir, and Mr. Sive-wright another.'

'You are vastly conscientious, sir,' said Lucius; 'but as it would take at least a day to go through these things, and as my ignorance unfits me for the task, I think I will take my chance, and not oppose any hindrance to your prompt departure. I'll wait hereabouts till Mrs. Wincher is ready.'

'As you please, sir. In that case I'll go off at once and look about me for a room.'

'Stay, Mr. Wincher,' cried Lucius, as the old man shuffled off towards the door; 'I should be sorry for you to leave this house penniless. Here are a couple of sovereigns, which will enable you to live for a week or so while you look for a new service.'

'A new service, sir!' echoed Jacob Wincher bitterly. 'Do you think that at my age situations are

plentiful? No, sir, thank you; I couldn't take money from you, not if it was to save me from starvation. I shall seek no new service. Mr. Sivewright was never a very liberal paymaster, and since we came to this house he has given us no wages except a small allowance for our food. But our wants are few, and we contrived to save the best part of our wages while we were in Bond-street. No, sir, I am not afraid to face the world, hard as it is to the old. I shall get a few odd jobs to do among the poor folks, I daresay, even without a character, and I shall be able to rub along somehow.'

Thus refusing Lucius's proffered aid, Jacob Wincher put on his hat and went out. Lucius went into the room which contained the chief part of Mr. Sivewright's collection, and waited there with the door open until Mr. Wincher's good lady should make her appearance, ready for departure.

He looked round at the chaotic mass of property wonderingly. How much had been plundered? The shabby old glass cases of china seemed full enough, yet who could tell how they had been thinned by the dexterous hand of one who knew the exact value of each separate object? It seemed hard that the fruit of Homer Sivewright's toil should have been thus lessened; it seemed strange that he,

who was a professed cynic, should have so entirely trusted his old servant, only to be victimised by him at last.

Mrs. Wincher made her appearance, after an interval of about half an hour, laden with three bundles of various shapes and sizes, but all of the limpest description, two handboxes, an ancient and dilapidated umbrella, a small collection of hardware in a hamper without a lid, a faded Paisley shawl across her arm, a bottle-green cloth cloak of antediluvian shape and style, and sundry small oddments in the way of pattens, a brown-crockery teapot, a paste-board, and a pepperbox.

‘They’re our few little comforts, sir,’ she said apologetically, as divers of these minor objects slid from her grasp and rolled upon the stone floor of the hall. ‘I suppose if we was sent to Newgate as prisoners we shouldn’t be allowed to have ’em; but as there’s no crime brought against us *yet*—with profoundest irony—‘I’ve took the liberty to bring ’em. Perhaps you’d like to look through my bundles, Dr. Davory, to make sure as there’s none of the bricklebrack hidden amongst my good gentleman’s wardrobe.’

‘No, thank you, Mrs. Wincher. I won’t trouble you to open your bundles,’ answered Lucius, whose

keen eye had taken note of the manner of goods contained in those flabby envelopes.

Thus absolved from the necessity of exhibiting these treasures, Mrs. Wincher built them up in a neat pyramid by the side of the hall-door, with infinite pains, as if the monument were intended to be permanent, and then seated herself meekly on the lowest step of the staircase.

‘I suppose as there’s no objections to my resting my pore feet a bit, Dr. Davory,’ she said plainly, ‘though me and my good gentleman is dismissed.’

‘You are quite at liberty to rest yourself, Mrs. Wincher,’ replied Lucius. ‘But I don’t mean to take my eye off you till you’re out of this house,’ he added mentally.

He paced the hall and the room adjoining till the bell at the outer gate announced Jacob Wincher’s return. Mrs. Wincher went to admit her lord and master, who presently appeared with a small truck or hand-barrow, in which, aided by his wife, he deposited the pyramid of goods and chattels, which process involved a good deal more careful fitting-in of curiously-shaped objects into odd corners. Everything, however, having been finally adjusted to the satisfaction of both parties, Mr. Wincher reëntered

the house for the last time, while Mrs. Wincher waited on the steps, and delivered the keys to Lucius. Every key was neatly labelled with a slip of parchment, whereon was inscribed its number in Homer Sivewright's crabbed penmanship.

'Those are all the keys, sir, just as my master gave them to me when we first came here,' said Jacob Wincher. 'I've got a bit of a lodging. Perhaps you'd be kind enough to take down the address, as I should be glad to learn if ever you find out the real party that took the silver out of the chest, and likewise tampered with the medicine.'

'If ever I find any evidence of your innocence you shall hear of it, Mr. Wincher,' answered Lucius gravely. 'What is the address?'

'Mrs. Hickett's, Crown-and-Anchor-alley, Bridge-street, sir; not a quarter of an hour's walk from here.'

Lucius wrote the address in his pocket-book without another word.

This last duty performed the Winchers departed, and Lucius felt that he had taken the one step most likely to insure the safety of his patient.

'If not they, who else?' he said to himself, thinking of the arsenic in the medicine bottle.

He went once more to Lucille's room, but hardly



crossed the threshold. The sick girl was sleeping, and the nurse gave a very fair account of her. He told Mrs. Milderson her duties — how she was to attend to Mr. Sivewright as well as to his granddaughter, and told her furthermore how he had just dismissed the old servants.

‘I am going in search of some one to take their place,’ he said, having made up his mind upon that point some time ago.

He went round the lower part of the house, tried all the keys, saw that all the doors were secured — those opening on the garden bolted and barred as firmly as if they had belonged to a besieged citadel. He looked through all the labels, but found no key to the staircase door up-stairs; a circumstance that annoyed him, as he had a particular desire to examine those rooms on the top story. Then, having made all safe, he went out, locking the hall-door and the iron gate after him, and proceeded straightway to Mr. Otranto’s office.

Here he told that functionary exactly what he had done. Mr. Otranto chewed the end of his pen, and smiled upon his client with the calm smile of intellectual superiority.

‘Now, I daresay you think you’ve been and gone and done a very clever thing,’ he said, when Lucius



had unbosomed himself; 'but I can just tell you you're on the wrong tack—a good hundred knots out of your course. That old party isn't in the robbery; and as to the pison, it's not for me to argue with a professional gent like you; no sorter should alter his crepidam, as we say in the Classics; but I wouldn't mind laying even money that the pison is only your fancy. You've been worriting yourself about this blessed business till you've got nervous, so you goes and sniffs at the physic, and jumps at the conclusion that it's poisoned.'

'I have not jumped at any conclusion,' replied Lucius. 'My opinion is supported by an infallible test.'

He told Mr. Otranto that he wanted to find a thoroughly honest man and woman, who would take the place of the Winchers at Cedar House—a man who would act as night watchman, and a woman who would perform such trifling domestic duties as were needed. Mr. Otranto, who had minions of all kinds at his beck and call, did know of just such a couple—an ex-policeman, who had left the force on account of an accident that had lamed him, and a tidy body, the ex-policeman's wife. If Mr. Davoren wished, they should be at Cedar House in two hours' time.

'Let them meet me at the gate at three o'clock,'

said Lucius. 'I must go round among my patients in the mean while.'

His day's work still waited to be done, and it was long past twelve—dinner-time in the Shadrack district. He had to endure reproachful looks from some of his patients, but bore all with perfect good-temper, and did his very best for all. Happily the people believed in him, and were grateful for all the good he had done among them.

At three o'clock he was at the iron gate, where he found Mr. Magsby, the ex-policeman, and his wife—a comfortable-looking young woman with a bundle and a baby, for which latter encumbrance Lucius had not bargained, and for which Mrs. Magsby duly apologised.

'Which Mr. Otranter may not have told you, sir, as I couldn't leave the baby behind, but she's as good a little dear as ever drew breath, and never cries, and in a large house will be no ill-convenience.'

'Perhaps not, if she never cries,' said Lucius, 'but if she does cry, you must smother her, rather than let her voice be heard up-stairs.' And then he touched the small cheek kindly with his finger, and smiled upon the little one, after a fashion which at once won Mrs. Magsby's heart.

Mr. Magsby's lameness was little more than a

halt in his walk, and, although sufficient to disable him as a public servant, was no hindrance to him as a night-watchman. Altogether Lucius decided that the Magsbys would do. He inducted them in the gloomy old kitchen and the room with the presses, where Mr. and Mrs. Wincher's turn-up bedstead yawned disconsolate and empty, and where there were such bits of humble furniture as would suffice for the absolute needs of life.

Mrs. Magsby pronounced the apartments roomy and commodious, but somewhat wanting in cheerfulness. 'But me and Magsby have took care of all manner of houses,' she added with resignation, 'and we can make ourselves comfortable amost anywheres, purvided we've a bit o' firing to bile the kettle for our cup o' tea and a mouthful of victuals.'

Lucius showed Mr. Magsby the premises—the door opening upon the hidden staircase, all the ins and outs of the place—and told him what was expected of him.

After this induction of the Magsbys, he went upstairs and saw Lucille. She was awake, but her mind still wandered. She looked at him with a far-off unrecognising gaze that went to his heart, and murmured some broken sentence, in which the name of 'father' was the only word he could distinctly hear.

'Pray to our Father in heaven, dearest,' said

Lucius, tenderly supporting the weary head, which moved so restlessly upon the pillow. 'He is the only Father who never wrongs His children; in whose love and wisdom we can believe, come weal, come woe.'

He stayed by the bedside a little while, gave his instructions to Mrs. Milderson, and then went to the other sick-room.

Here he found Mr. Sivewright, fretful and impatient, but decidedly improved since the suspension of the medicine; a fact which that gentleman dwelt upon in a somewhat cynical spirit.

'You may remember that at the beginning of our acquaintance I professed myself a sceptic with regard to medical science,' he said with his harsh laugh, 'and I cannot say that my experience even of your skill has been calculated to conquer my prejudices. You are a very good fellow, Lucius, but the only effect of your medicines for the last month or so has been to make me feel nearer death than ever I felt before. I seem to be twice the man I was since I left off that confounded tonic of yours.'

'I am very glad to hear it—not glad that the tonic has failed, but that you are better. Try to believe in me a little, however, in spite of this.'

'Have you sent away those thieves?'

'Mr. and Mrs. Wincher? Yes, they are gone.'

‘So ends five-and-twenty years’ service! And I thought them faithful!’ said Mr. Sivewright with a sigh. ‘And by what models of honesty have you replaced these traitors?’

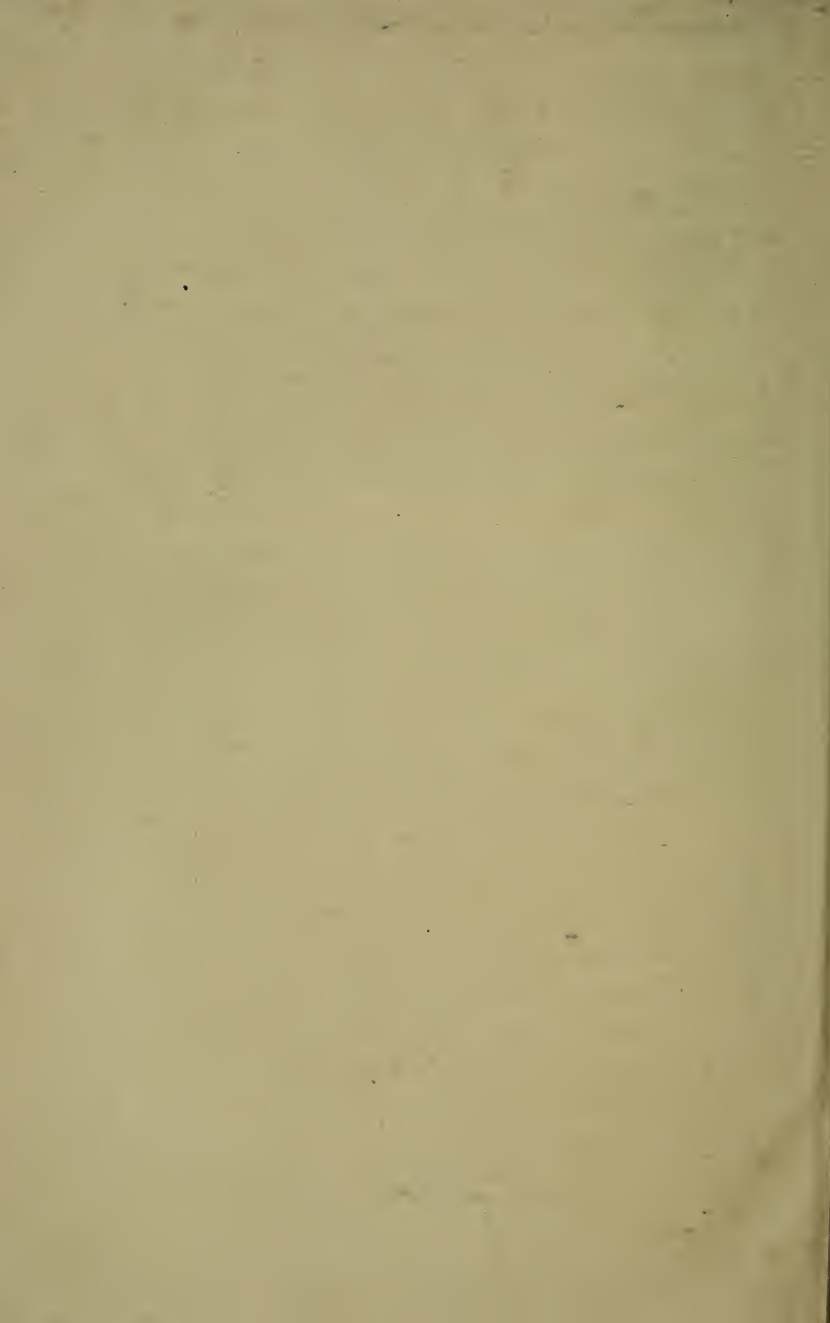
Lucius explained his arrangements, to which Mr. Sivewright gave but doubtful approval.

He inquired anxiously about Lucille, and seemed grieved to find that she was too ill to come to him as usual.

‘Though for these many years past I have doubted the existence of any relationship between us, she has made herself dear to me somehow, in spite of myself. God knows I have tried to shut my heart against her. When my son abandoned me, I swore never to care for any living creature—never again to subject myself to the anguish that an ingrate can inflict.’

END OF VOL. II.









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